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WARPED DESIRES

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A BEAUTIFUL, RUTHLESS SLAVE . . .

A slave to her insane desire for wealth, sultry red-headed Elaine Warburton lived only for money! "Wave a dollar bill under her nose," said her best friend, "and there's *nothing* she wouldn't do."

Her wealthy prince charming was a fat old man of 60, but Elaine yearned for another man's kisses and her arms ached for his passionate caresses.

She thought she could have both—after all, hadn't money bought her everything else?

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A LANCER DOMINO BOOK • COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

WARPED DESIRES

GORDON SEMPLE

LANCER DOMINO BOOKS • NEW YORK

A LANCER DOMINO BOOK • 1963

WARPED DESIRES (Orig. Title: Slave of Desire)

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CHAPTER ONE

A STIR OF excitement ran through the foyer of the *Club Piquant*. The doorman helped the bald cause of it through the glass double-doors and snapped imperious fingers at the hatcheck girl. In turn, the voluptuous blonde exposed another inch of perfumed breasts, rang the manager's bell, then hurried around the counter to deal with the problem of a velvet-collared evening coat. It took a bit of doing to detach the coat from Mr. Endicott and her left buttock from Mr. Endicott's fingers, but she managed to, just as Mr. Balke came briskly from the office.

"An honor," intoned Mr. Balke with a very deep bow. "If I may say it, sir, a signal honor, indeed!"

And now the excitement rippled to the Lanai Room, a large, pseudo-Hawaiian affair complete with rattan furniture, parakeets in gilded cages, and grass-skirted hula girls wiggling their bottoms. Waiters whispered to customers, and customers whispered to one another. Chairs were pushed back and people rose the better to see the visitor.

Amid a babble of speculation the great man was led to the mezzanine overlooking the dance floor and stage. He stumbled. The head waiter leaped to his rescue. Was his vision fogged, perhaps, by a mist of rum? Then let there be lights! Mr. Balke gave the order to the head waiter, and by a succession of waiters the order was relayed to the hatcheck girl. It startled her.

"Geez," she exclaimed to the doorman, "Miss Warburton will scream!"

"When we get home, honey, I'm gonna paddle you good."

"Geez, all I did was give him a look and a feel. If that don't get us a fiver—"

"With a strap, honey, on your bare skin."

"Geez, ain't you got an eye for a buck."

"Just an eye for my wife, honey, ain't that old-fashioned?"

She wondered why she'd married him. Nothing but sex at home, nothing but wisecracks and threats at work. Miss Warburton, she thought, was smart. No matter how much of a bigshot Mr. Endicott was, he was still a man. All men, she thought, were dirt.

"The lights, honey, the lights!"

Reminded, she rushed to the switch.

With the help of the lights Wallace Endicott ascended the mezzanine stairs. If he was aware of the excitement he gave no sign. With commendable aplomb he seated himself at a table set for five and ordered a magnum of champagne. It was possible that he gave a sigh of relief when the lights dimmed and the show got underway again, but if so, no one noticed.

"Imagine it!" squealed a gay young thing from the rolling wastes of Nevada. "Sweetie-duck, it's better than a movie!"

"Hell," predicted Sweetie-duck, "is gonna pop."

God forbid, thought the great man, *God forbid!*

The eyes of Nevada rounded as bottoms wiggled once more on the stage. "But *why,* Sweetie-duck, *why* is that naughty word gonna pop?"

If she belonged to me, thought the great man, *I'd tear out her tongue.*

"Because," said Sweetie-duck.

"Oh." As though that settled everything, Nevada's dubious contribution to Twentieth Century life turned her eyes back to the great man's face.

He wondered why she lived.

He wondered why any of them lived.

All they were good for, he thought, was a tumble under the moon. And all too often, he reflected, they weren't very proficient at that. Always the inhibitions, always the damned coyness, always the damned price.

"He sure don't look like a great lover," Nevada sighed. "If he was a steer, Sweetie-duck, you'd get an awful lot of money for him in Chicago."

"Shhh, I think he can hear you."

"Of course he can't hear us! Don't you see how rapped up in love he is? Sweetie-duck, why'd she break the engagement? They say he's got a hundred million dollars!"

Wallace Endicott wondered himself. It was all damn foolishness. Who the hell had she been before he'd picked her out of the gutter? Who the hell was she to put on the airs of a lady?

"She said," continued Sweetie-duck, "that her career came first." He laughed a worldly laugh. "In other words, the old scoundrel was probably fooling around with a piece of fluff."

"Sweetie-duck!"

"You're in New York, dear, remember? In New York we call a spade a spade."

Nevada sniffed. "I think that was a dirty thing to say, *Mr.* Reeves. Do you think he'd expose himself to a snubbing if he

didn't just adore her? Well, that just goes to show that New Yorkers aren't very smart after all."

The head waiter appeared with the champagne bucket. "Ready for a drink, Mr. Endicott?"

"You're more welcome, son, than you'll ever know."

"I told Miss Warburton you was here, sir."

"Did you, now? That was most kind of you."

The cork popped with a fine, expensive sound.

"Sweetie-duck," asked Nevada, "do you think he'll drink some from her slipper? That would be real, real nice."

The excitement spread backstage. That amused the object of the great man's affection, but she was careful to keep her sniggers to herself. She drew the lace-edged panties over her hips and then reached for the "peek-a-boo" bra. But in the act of hooking the black wisp into place she remembered the order of the numbers had been changed. Appropriately, the next sketch would see her seated beneath a palm tree, singing of a lost, lost love. She supposed that would make the maudlin, sentimental customers weep into their Scotch-and-sodas.

And the dirty, two-timing bastard? Her green eyes flamed. It occurred to her she was sick and tired of the endless fuss. God knew the publicity had been welcome. Because of it the customers had poured in and Balke had upped her pay to five hundred a week net. But the damned cameras! The damned simpering old ladies who rushed up to congratulate her every time she went out for her constitutional! And Ted! She met Kitty Forbes' curious blue eyes and scowled. "I'm not going on. If I do, I'll clobber him with a beer bottle."

"A fortune is a fortune."

"Lying to me! Using me like a—a pen wiper!"

Kitty beat the angry hand to the china figurine. She scooped it from the table and dropped it to the safety of her lap. She wondered what all the fuss was about, and whether Elaine was smoking goof-butts again. There was the glitter in the girl's sea-green eyes, and a twitch of the ripe scarlet lips.

"You talk like a nut," she sighed. "Remember Lefty's place in California? You sang, you stripped, you whored. But that was okay. We had our fancy dreams, didn't we? Someday, we used to dream, we'd be in New York. We even dreamed we'd—"

Knuckles cracked on the door. "Five minutes," came the call in a properly reverential voice. "Five minutes, Miss Warburton."

Elaine Warburton shrugged. Her copper-red hair lustrous

in the lights, she dropped onto the padded vanity-table bench. She made a fine, sexy sight even to the dancer who'd once been the youngest Madame out on the Pacific Coast. She wondered where Elaine had got that clean, glowing skin and the shape which had been modeled to wow. Certainly not from her mother. The best any man had ever been able to say of her mother was that she had a heart of unalloyed gold. Kitty heaved an envious sigh.

"I wish I were in your scanties, I'll tell you that."

"Honeying up to that Southern Drawl! Trying to make a cool five million on me, then giving *her* the rubies! Now let him sweat!"

"He'll sweat more," she went on, "if you make it something big. You walk out tonight and Balke will blackball you. That'll hurt you, not Napoleon."

Elaine supposed that was true. Sighing, she slipped the make-up mask over her face.

"Isn't it the palm tree number, Elaine?"

"Oh damn!" Her mind, having completed the cycle, went back to the matter of the "peek-a-boo" bra. She unhooked it and threw it. Annoyed by bubbling laughter, she shot a murderous glance at Kitty's thin, elfin face. "And what's so amusing?"

"I was just thinking about the ironies of show business. When we're playing proper girls in sweet young thing dresses we never wear bras. But when we're playing the parts of whores then we do. Don't you find that interesting?"

"Maybe I'll see the joke if you'll tell me what a proper girl is."

"The 'Southern Drawl,' as you call her. By the way, she's one of your fans. I heard her tell Balke you're really good."

Animal white teeth flashed, then ground. "The easiest thing in the world to be," announced Elaine Warburton, "is a good winner."

She took the summer evening dress from the wardrobe closet. She thought it was another irony of show business that only top drawer stars could afford to buy clothes as elegant as the clothes they worked in. But that irony didn't amuse her, either. With the help of Kitty she wriggled into the dress. It was coral pink chiffon over taffeta. When it was just so on her shapely figure, she was a sweet, young thing, if Kitty had ever seen the breed.

"Napoleon," said Kitty Forbes firmly, "is insane."

Now the ravishing woman went to her jewel box and took out the choker of cultured pearls. From the tray she took a

bracelet of matching pearls and slipped it over her wrists. She surveyed the total effect in the mirror. And then it came to her as it always did: how nice it would be if she were that bewitching young lady!

How nice it would be if the jewels of the velvet flower trim *were* real!

She spun from the mirror. A tempestuous, pagan animal she took a long step toward Kitty and demanded, "Why not? Will you answer me that? Why the hell shouldn't I have all the marbles?"

Again knuckles beat on the door. "On stage, Miss Warburton. On stage!"

Through the opening door came the sultry entrance music. And now heads filled the doorways of the long hall which led directly to the stage.

"Dear boy," said Elaine Warburton, sweetly, patting the gray head of the man who'd summoned her to duty. "Dear, dear boy."

"You look wonderful, Miss Warburton."

"Geez, Miss Warburton, are them pearls out of an honest-to-Gawd oyster?"

"Don't worry, Miss Warburton! He'll take one look at you and make you forget your career if it kills him."

"Dear girls," said a properly tremulous voice. "Dear kind and loyal friends."

Kitty tingled. If ever stuff had been made for a millionaire's tiara, that redheaded stuff was it.

To thunderous applause the girl made her entrance.

Excitement roared to its crescendo.

Kettle drums boomed, a trombone wailed. A jagged flare of red swept across the sky of Broadway's version of Last Mauna Loa, then came the thunder of a volcano in eruption. Imitation palm trees bent before a mighty rush of wind. A sepulchral voice off-stage called out in Brooklynese Hawaiian: "Kilauea's berlin' over!" Then frightful screams rent the air and found multiplication in flatted trumpet peals and keening flutes. A hand went to a respectable young bosom, an agitated sweet young thing crouched at the base of one of the rustling palms.

From the left wing a dancer flitted dramatically to screech news that brought the star to her feet. "Wallace," she cried in heartbroken tones. "Wallace!"

Cymbals crashed. A spotlight stabbed through the dark, etch-

ing sweet young grief against a flaming sky. And suddenly it was noted by the observant that Miss Elaine Warburton was staring at the Great Man. The audience sighed.

Whispered Nevada to Sweetie-duck: "It's like being right where history is happening, it is!"

At his table the Great Man scowled. Now a smaller spotlight was glaring on his face, and no matter where he moved the damned thing followed him.

I'll kill her, he thought, *I'll break her damned neck.*

The orchestra struck a heavy chord. Obligingly the famed Kilauea ceased erupting while the palm trees stiffened into attention. Then full and rich rose the voice of a woman lamenting lost love.

Of palms in the sunset she sang, of coral strands luminous and fragrant under the moon. With pathos the glorious voice told of a maiden's dream, told of lips that had touched hers with honey.

Whispered Nevada to Sweetie-duck: "I'll die! I know I'll just die!"

It was a powerful voice now. Now notes echoed from the walls, the ceiling, dominating the room, the imagination. It dwelt on the bliss of love, the intoxication of love, the sacred beauty of love undying. It made you see a happy boy and girl catching their fish and picking their coconuts and dreaming their golden dreams. It made you see parents giving their blessings with a smile; giggling girls congratulating the bride-to-be while brown-skinned men of the world bade farewell to a man whose bacheolor days were coming to an end. And then with stark, vivid words it described Kilauea, the largest active volcano in the world. You saw the smoke and ashes darkening the sky, you saw the sudden belching of flames, you saw liquefied earth rolling down the slopes to crush, to burn. And as red flared across the stage sky anew you saw a young man trapped in a sea of molten lava, all the golden dreams ended, a woman's heart splintered into thousands of fragments of grief.

"Dead," came the last haunting word. "Dead!"

There was a sob, there was the final pathetic reaching of firm round arms for a dream.

Then up came the orchestra to engulf sobbing moons with a thunder of brass and drums. In center stage Miss Elaine Warburton wobbled.

The curtain dropped, a lovelorn lady swooned.

"You beast!" cried Nevada. "You mean, mean beast!"

The Great Man swallowed. As the house lights came up he

twisted on his chair. "Damn it, did *I* break the engagement?"

He surged to his feet as Elaine stepped out behind the curtain to acknowledge the thunderous applause.

I hate women, he thought with cold detachment. *I hate every damned ounce of their damned flesh.*

Flash bulbs glared in his eyes, people pushed at him and shouted at him. And a madwoman clutched at his arm and screamed, "She's coming to you, don't you see she's coming to you?"

He wished he'd listened to Otto. *What a stink the rabble had! What a wretched noise the rabble made.*

"She loves you," gibbered the madwoman. "Couldn't you hear that in her voice?"

There'd been too much publicity, he thought. The whole damned thing had thrilled too damned many sentimental people who still believed in the Cinderella story.

He met the mocking green eyes of the slut as she came up the mezzanine steps with the long-legged lout who managed her. The temptation welled up in him to knock her flat. Then he remembered the five million he had to get from Niles in order to buy the damned New England railroad.

For five million, he thought, *I'd kiss a leper.*

He kissed the warm curve of her cheek while all the silly romanticists in the crowd smiled and cheered.

"Beautiful," he intoned. "The most beautiful voice and woman in the world."

"Dear Wallace." She sank gracefully to a chair, arranging the folds of her skirt just so. "You know Ted Underwood, don't you? My manager? Ted, this is Wallace Endicott. In the event you don't know it, he deals in millions and rubies and things like that."

"It was Sarah's birthday. Damn it, I had to buy her something."

"Also, Ted, he collects Southern drawls. And sometimes he even tells a girl fibs."

"When I get you alone . . ."

"Smile at the romantic bastards," she sighed in a stage whisper. "Do smile at them, Napoleon."

"Listen, I want to talk to you."

Her roving green eyes found the bottle of champagne in the ice bucket.

"Wallace, how very thoughtful!"

The head waiter all but leaped to the table. Inspired by the twenty-dollar bill Miss Warburton had slipped into his pocket

back stage, he plucked the bottle from the ice and held it high. "To love," he toasted. "To the great love of our age."

It made Nevada weep at the nearby table. "It's the Cinderella story," she sobbed to Sweetie-duck. "She's found her Prince Charming and she'll live like a Princess the rest of her life."

That reminded Elaine of a slipper, of a pleasant custom.

While the crowd goggled she drew the slipper from her foot and set it down on the table. "If you wouldn't mind, Michael?"

The head waiter rose to the occasion. A clear, sparkling stream of gold cascaded into the slipper.

And now a hush fell over the room. This was the moment of reconciliation. Again love had conquered, again all was right with the world. The newspaper romance of millionaire and pauper would become a story-book wedding. Such things didn't happen? Ridiculous! Wasn't it happening right there before everyone's eyes?

It was big enough, thought Elaine, it would make headlines.

"Ted," she sighed, "won't you drink from my slipper?"

Nevada shuddered. "No," she protested, "no!"

But Ted Underwood rose. While people gaped, while photographers flash bulbs half-blinded him, he touched the slipper to his lips.

Thought the Great Man firmly: *There's a young fellow who should die.*

It had been, everyone agreed, quite a night at the *Club Piquant, quite* a night, indeed!

CHAPTER TWO

ACROSS A POOL of moonlight she walked to the French window of the porch. Pagan that she was, she halted there in a shaft of gold, lifting her hands to her hair, arching her back prettily. Her green eyes shone, her strong, white teeth flashed. Her lips reminded him of a pomegranate and he wanted to taste the sweet, crimson pulp. Then down the gilded body his eyes wandered. He shivered.

"Drooling, Ted?"

The voice jarred.

"Slavering, Ted?"

He wished she'd forget her gutter ways. "Maybe," he said, "he'd have married you if you'd taken the trouble to be a lady. Give the guy his due. The wife of a bigshot should always be a lady."

Her hands spatted to her thighs. She growled menacingly in her throat and he fully expected to see her fly into one of her damnable tantrums. But in the act of reaching for something to throw she recalled she still had a need of him. She shrugged. "In bed, Ted, men don't ask you to show them your pedigree. There it seems, all flesh is flesh."

She opened the French window and stepped out to the porch. In the moonglow the undulant surface of Manhasset Bay twinkled with an irresistible allure. She hurried down the porch steps and walked through the warm sand to the water's edge. But the water was cool to her toes, too cool for swimming. Sighing, she sat down on the sand. She wondered what Wallace was thinking about in his great fieldstone house across the Bay. She wondered what his thoughts would be tomorrow after he'd seen the black headlines in the newspapers and had heard the radio broadcasts. She chuckled. If she lived to be a hundred, she thought, she'd never forget the expression which had flitted to his face when she'd handed her slipper to Ted. That had been Waterloo for the Twentieth Century Napoleon. It had been worse. There in public she'd made a fool of him, and with the same weapons he'd been using in his attempt to make a fool of James H. Niles!

"Wallie," she asked softly, "aren't I a little scamp?"

She turned as a humming Ted came out to the beach. "Do you think he'd like to kill me?"

He had other things on his mind. His eyes told her it had been a long time, his hands told her he was growing impatient.

"It'd lead to what, Ted? Why don't you ever think of that?"

In the moonlight he scowled, a gilded caveman. She wondered why some woman hadn't snatched him from circulation a long time ago. He'd always make a buck, if not a fortune. He was clever, wasn't she the living proof of that? What had she been before he'd wandered into Lefty's joint out in California one foggy afternoon? Yet see her now! He was a good-looking rascal, too. His shoulders were broad, his chest and back were properly ridged with muscles. At college he'd been a football hero, and at thirty he still looked quite capable of draping a woman over his shoulder and bulling her through life to touchdown territory.

"All you think of is the moment, Ted. The tingling caress, the explosive rapture! What you never stop to remember is that passion isn't an eternity. You wake up in the morning and you've still got a lot of living to do. And living takes dough, and in order to make dough, a girl—"

"You'll make dough. You damn fool, why the hell do you think all those photographers were there? You'll make front pages from one end of the country to the other. Television will want you, and other clubs will want you. You're now the girl who wouldn't marry Old Moneybags. Don't you see it?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him she was several hundred yards ahead of him, but she bit the words down. The trick was always to make them think they'd thought up the clever touches. That way their ego was kept happy and they'd be around to help out again when you needed their help.

She ignored the arm stealing around her waist. It was a comfortable arm. At least it wasn't illusion of the kind Wallace had been giving her. Remembering, she sucked in her breath.

"Why the devil didn't he give it to me as a business proposition? That would've been all right. Why the devil did he have to build me up to a letdown? You know what I'd like to do? I'd like to give Niles an earful. He was so clever, Mr. Wallace Endicott!"

She jumped.

"Damn it, Ted, that's the ticklish spot."

It gave him an opening. "It's been so long, I forget. And who the hell are you to complain about being used? What about me? Did it ever occur to you that I love you?"

"If he'd told me he needed the money from Niles I'd have understood. For a lousy fifty thousand or so I'd have given the most convincing performance Niles had ever seen."

Vibrato crept into his voice. "I'd spend a lifetime working for you, Baby. You wouldn't want for anything. I'd get the moon for you if it killed me."

"But he was too cheap to pay me a fee. Hail the great Napoleon! He had to string me along. He had to kid a girl about marriage. He had to make her think she'd be a millionaire."

"Your lips are pomegranates, Baby, did I ever tell you?"

She stiffened with remembered fury. "And all the time honeying up to the 'Southern drawl'! Giving me the business, giving her the rubies. Ted, you should've seen those rubies. Ted, they were fire in stone. Ted . . ."

"A man would die for you, Baby. A man would die for you to make you happy."

She shivered. She wondered how he'd gotten her down across his lap, she wondered if he had a hundred hands. "Damn it, Ted, why couldn't you have been born with a fortune?"

The green corn of Kansas came unabashedly from his mouth: "When I'm with you, Baby, I'm the richest man in the world."

Suddenly she squirmed to her knees, then with a quick surge leaped to her feet. The big, glowing moon excited her just as it did when she was a child. She felt a crazy urge to run, she had a longing for the wind in her hair, for the cool feel of rushing night wind on her body. "Ted," she whooped, "let's race!"

His heart stopped beating, the air left his lungs.

"I'm Aphrodite under the moon, Ted. Ted, you're Adonis!"

"Damn it" he roared.

But now all the moonlight was in her veins. She felt warm and golden, like the queen of the night. She spun and darted off up the beach. In her laughter excitement tinkled—and promise of more. That drew Ted to his feet and sent him after her.

And now the wind blew her hair, and the wind was cool on her body. Beneath her feet was the cool feel of wet sand, and on her right the Bay sang in a smother of foam and golden moonlight. She pulled away from him. With a great burst of speed she reached the rocks standing in brooding majesty in the wet of the rising tide. She splashed through the water and leaped nimbly to the top of a small rock, and there she stood shouting pagan laughter and thumping on her chest as he paused, temporarily, to catch his breath.

"You have to catch me," came the words, the babbling words

of a little girl child. "That's all you have to do, Ted. You just have to catch me."

A wave rose and fell, splashing her with liquid moonlight.

"I'm delighted, Ted! Ted, I'm Aphrodite under the moon!"

He drew in a great breath of salty air and plunged into the water. She lost sight of him as another wave came rolling in to engulf him with golden foam. She stared down at the water, waiting for his head to reappear. Then a memory made her straighten up and giggle. She looked at the rocks behind her and played with the thought of climbing to the highest one. Then a better idea occurred to her. She slid down from the rock and splashed back to the sand. Imagine trying to use the same trick on her twice! Did he think she was a fool? Did he think she'd let him sneak up on her from the rear a second time?

"Men," she told the moon, "are silly children."

As though the thought painted it, the moon slid behind a cloud.

"Hello," said a quiet voice. "Fancy meeting you here."

She jumped.

A hand closed on her arm, then a wrist and then another hand slid around her thigh and lifted her from the sand.

"Ted, you're in the water! Ted, you're trying to sneak up behind me. Damn it, Ted, why don't you play fair?"

She squirmed. Tiny fists beat at his back, teeth nipped at his shoulder.

But Ted Underwood had waited quite long enough. He carried her back to the cottage, back to the bedroom. He slammed her to the mattress and thumped his chest. Then came the snarl of the damned caveman, the charge of the caveman.

"Ted," moaned a voice in the dark. "You delicious Ted, you!"

Tenderly, deliciously, wandered the lips, while the hands drew her nerves tighter and tighter. She reached for him, clung to him.

"You love me. Damn you, say it!" he whispered.

Not if she died, thought her feverish mind. She was headed for big things. She'd outsmarted Napoleon himself. Who the hell was Ted to think she'd been born for the likes of him? But she did love him.

To hell with money and position, she thought. This was it! This was why a girl lived!

"I love you," she sobbed involuntarily. "You damn pauper, I love you!"

His mouth silenced her. His teeth dug into her lips. The

pain of those teeth made her gasp. She beat on his shoulders, his ribs.

There was the gold of the night, there was the fragrance of the night.

There was the rhythm of the sea, there was the sweetness of the moment.

Then sea and gold and sweetness coalesced magically into ecstasy.

"The love stays, you see," he whispered. "It's the only thing that does."

"Corn," she said scathingly. "Pure Kansas corn!"

Yet in a strange way it soothed her all through the night. Even in her sleep it gave her a peculiar sense of importance, and when she awakened in the broad light of the sun with Hannah King roaring in her ear, the words were the first thing she remembered. She stared up at Hannah's fat, red face.

"Hannah, did you know that love's eternal? Even feels good when you're sound asleep?"

The enormous housekeeper was unimpressed. She'd heard the words before and she knew she'd hear them again. In that respect, at least, Miss Elaine Warburton was always consistent. When she had them she loved them. The love always left her feeling good. But by noon she was always herself again, and was the first to laugh when you repeated the mawkish sentiments she uttered each time she rose from the good old bed of passion.

"Balke's on the telephone."

"Oh?"

The green eyes flitted around the room. They recorded the absence of masculine attire and remarked on the cleanliness of the ashtrays. "You'd think he'd hang around just once, wouldn't you, Hannah?"

A tidy figure in a gray uniform, Hannah went to the windows and pulled Venetian blinds ceilingward. "At least he had sense. He knows what's good for him."

Sensing the breeding of a storm Elaine swung her feet to the floor. She noticed she now had three bruises on her thighs, and they troubled her. In the whore number at the Club they'd be seen. Then filthy minds would start wondering . . .

"Hannah, why are they always so rough?"

"Did I say Balke was on the telephone?"

"Mad?"

"Happy."

"Hannah!"

Hannah wiped perspiration from her brow with a swipe of a flashy hand. "You got into all the newspapers, all right. And now it seems that everybody wants you. Balke has a television offer. He wants you to okay it."

The green eyes narrowed. "Did he mention remuneration, Hannah? That's so very important. Hannah, you see before you a woman who won't be a millionaire."

Hannah began to wonder if the girl had been the damn fool Kitty had called her a few minutes ago. She shook her iron-gray head. Inside the wheels of Elaine Warburton's mind were more wheels. And around and around they went, and the first thing anyone knew Miss Warburton was sitting pretty as you please right where she wanted to sit. Other girls had better voices and were just as pretty, yet it was she who was making twenty-five grand a year.

"At least, Hannah, that's what Kitty seems to think. She seems to think I should've gone on with Wallace for as long as I could."

"So did I."

The animal white teeth flashed. Quick as always, Elaine's dainty ears noted the use of the past tense. She ran it through her mind, then decided it made sense.

"Wallace telephoned?"

Gray eyes widened; Hannah's unpainted lips formed a round O.

"Hannah, darling, our relative positions aren't an accident. I'm where I am because I have a mind as well as the equipment. And my mind tells me it was logical for him to telephone."

"He—he telephoned. He wants to see you."

"I'll be busy for a week, Hannah, isn't that horrible?"

Hannah decided the water was getting too deep for her. She decided there'd be less wear and tear on her brain if she just did the work she was paid to do. "Want some breakfast, honey?"

"He wants a railroad in New England, you see. It can be had for five million. He has an option on it for sixty days. Now doesn't it make sense?"

Hannah beat a retreat toward the door. "Me, I'm a two-hundred-a-month servant. When I get above them figures, honey, I get all mixed up."

A contralto laugh rippled as Elaine began to taste the elixir of triumph. "It's very simple, you dope. Wallace is a promoter. As you know, a promoter always works with someone else's money. So he wants to borrow the money at five per cent from James Niles, financier. Finally when he has control of the

railroad he'll up the freight rates to bring in a return of ten per cent on the investment. That'll be five per cent clear, for him. Or a quarter of a million a year net."

The figures began to make Hannah dizzy. "I got some nice sausages in the kitchen, honey. Hey, Nellie's still on the telephone!"

"Let him stew."

"But television!"

It amused Elaine. Here she was, fighting for a million, yet all the damn fool servant could think of was a measly thousand or so!

"Pet," she said sweetly, "Wallace needs me. Because Niles, the banker, and Wallace, the promoter, are in love with the Southern drawl. Hence all the publicity about the romance of a millionaire and a nightclub singer. The idea was to reassure James Niles. Then James Niles would lend Wallace the five million. You see?"

Hannah stared. "And—and you broke the engagement and upset the apple-cart?"

"He told me he'd marry me, you see. Hannah, instead of paying me a fee, he lied. That was unchivalrous, don't you think?"

Hannah's mind raced on. "Geez," she whispered. "you got him over a barrel."

"Ted should have stayed," sighed Elaine. "I'm going back to bed."

CHAPTER THREE

"CLASS," THOUGHT Otto Wagenknecht, "real class."

He jumped from the lawnchair on the terrace and watched while Sarah Peabody paused to get her second wind. It seemed to him that she was the woman the Boss should marry, no matter how many railroads Miss Peabody cost. She began where most women ended. Maybe she didn't have the sexy shape of the Warburton tramp, but she had twice the personality, and was a real lady to boot. A man who had her would really have something. He wouldn't have to share her the way he'd have to share the redhead. A real thoroughbred filly, Sarah Peabody was. The man she married would have a wife he could count on for the rest of his life.

Scowling, Otto tromped on his cigarette butt and went back into the house. He followed his ears upstairs to the den and stepped inside. It pained him to see the Boss sitting like a mountain on the floor in front of the radio. Why the hell did he torture himself that way? Why the hell didn't he snap out of it? So he'd made a mistake and the redhead had put him over a barrel. So now everyone was laughing at him, even Mr. Niles. So what? The Boss still had all his millions and this classy house and estate, didn't he? He was also hale and hearty and Sarah Peabody still loved him. What the hell more could anyone want?

"You oughtta cut it, Boss. Cripes, the world ain't come to an end. Niles ain't the only guy with that kind of dough to lend, is he?"

Wallace Endicott grimaced. But as he raised a hand to wave his bodyguard into silence the radio broadcast came to an end. He shrugged and turned it off. Breathing stertorously, he surged to his feet. He went briskly to the chair, managing his huge body with an ease and skill that dumbfounded Otto, as usual. He dropped onto the chaise lounge before the fire and plucked a cigar from the nearby humidor and lighted it. In a cloud of yellow smoke he grinned faintly.

"You mustn't take defeats so seriously, Otto. They come to all of us at one time or another. Especially when the opposition is stern. This Elaine Warburton. She'd have made a brilliant business woman. How cleverly she uses her weapons. We must send her roses."

"Huh?" Otto sat down. A wisp of a man with a shock of white hair and very pale blue eyes, he forgot the caller he'd come upstairs to announce. "Look, Boss, you're the guy what's been takin' it all so serious like. Me, I said all along for you to forget it."

"The newspapers, the radio. It should all be very interesting to Niles. Did you hear the Broadway Ferret just a few minutes ago? Bribed. The little bitch went and bribed him to tell the story behind the story. Otto, the little bitch must have eavesdropped on us. Now it begins to make sense. Otto, we've underestimated her."

"She could," said Otto thoughtfully, "have an accident. The streets of New York, Boss—geez, but they're dangerous. You never know when a car or a truck is gonna come along and knock you flat."

It was temptation for Wallace Endicott. He'd been made a fool of in public, something his pride had always resented. Worse, the chances of obtaining the loan from Niles were practically nil. The banker had been suspicious from the beginning; now the end of the so-called romance would confirm his belief that the entire affair had been pre-arranged. There'd been too much publicity. The whole damned thing had gotten out of hand. The redhead's manager had had too much to say. And naturally the long-legged lout had been working for the benefit of his meal ticket. He sighed expansively. The first blunder had been the girl herself. He should have used Priscilla. And the second blunder had been made when he'd agreed to let the long-legged lout handle all the publicity. That job should have been assigned to his own publicity department. Still, accidents were painful and serious business. And putting the girl in a hospital with broken legs and arms wouldn't help anyway. Regretfully, he shook his enormous bald head. "It wouldn't do, Otto. It wouldn't do at all."

"Yeah, I guess not. There'd be more of a stink in all the newspapers and the first thing you knew Niles would be makin' you marry her. Geez, the thought makes a guy want a drink."

He went to the bottle of rye behind the small, well-equipped bar. "Want a snort, Boss?"

The brown eyes sobered. It occurred to Wallace Endicott that his bodyguard had been hitting the bottle pretty heavily of late. Presently he'd have to be sent back to a sanetarium again for the cure. That would be an inconvenience. Otto was a good man to have around when the business wars became hectic. Aside from the fact that he was quick when violence threat-

ened, he had a talent for sizing people up, a talent that was handy to have around. "I think you'd better not have one either, Otto. The memories, I suppose?"

"Boss, I see the whole damn thing even when I'm wide awake in the sunshine. Damn it, Boss, it gives a guy the creeps."

"A most unfortunate affair, Otto." Wallace Endicott took another puff on his cigar. "Maria was too young to die. And she was so beautiful, eh, Otto? She always reminded me of a flame, for some queer reason. I counted myself fortunate to be her husband. But come! If I can live without her you should certainly be able to forget."

Hysteria came into the scrawny man's voice. "But you didn't see her in the quicksand. I did. And she kept screaming and screaming, Boss. I hear her screamin' almost every damned night!"

A distant bell tinkled melodiously.

It brought Otto up short. His hand fell away from the rye. "Yeah. That was what I came up to tell you about. That's Miss Peabody callin'. Geez, Boss, they don't come classier than her. You know what I would do if I was you? I'd buy that damned railroad with my own dough and marry her and tell that tramp and Niles to go to hell. There, that's what I'd do."

Wallace Endicott scowled. He ground his cigar out in the ashtray and went back into his master bedroom. There were times when he grew tired of Otto. The damn fool! Did he think a chance to double one's capital was something to sneeze at? Particularly when it could be done with someone else's money? He ground his teeth in cold fury. Sooner or later he'd have to get rid of Otto. When the man was a teetotaler he was amusing to have around. He was very good at finding girls, and dismissing the dear creatures when there was no further need of them. And he was a help in business, too. He understood the human mind. When it came to dealing with the average person you couldn't have a better ally. But when his brain was befuddled by alcohol, by memories best forgotten . . .

"Come in here," he roared. "Come in here and help me dress."

"Otherwise," said Otto firmly, "you're gonna wish you'd never been born, Boss. You know what that redheaded tomato is? She's dynamite. Cripes, don't you see what she's tryin' to do? She's tryin' to make you marry her!"

Wallace Endicott stepped from his slacks and scratched an itch on his enormous belly. He went over to the huge, canopied bed and glanced thoughtfully around the room. "So it would

seem, wouldn't it? I think the blue is indicated, Otto. I have a vague recollection that I invited Miss Peabody to dinner."

Otto took the blue suit from the wardrobe closet. He wasn't sure it was manly for him to help even a big shot like Mr. Endicott to dress, but he took the trousers from the hanger anyway and dropped to his knees before the bed. He helped the fat legs through the legs of the trousers, then slipped the shoes onto the feet again. Sighing, he went to the ebony chest and took out a fresh shirt. "You could use a shave, Boss."

A knock sounded on the door of the den. After a decent interval Miss Jenson came to the door of the bedroom and knocked a second time. "Miss Peabody, sir. She says it's very important."

"Presently, Jenson, presently. You might show her through the rose gardens."

"Yes, Mr. Endicott."

Otto heaved a long, eloquent sigh. "She's awful pretty, Miss Jenson. Boss, you wanna give me Miss Jenson for Christmas?"

The door of the den banged shut.

"Your trouble," said Wallace Endicott gently, "is that you're not rich, Otto. It's a law of Nature that women love old men only when they have money."

"Just one night," breathed Otto. Now the pale blue eyes glistened, now the thin lips began to twist. "Boss, that dame really has some shape. She was made for lovin'."

Wallace Endicott sighed, remembering. "You might ask Priscillar Liken to pay me a visit, Otto. Tonight would be pleasant."

"Sure, Boss, sure. That's lots better, Boss. You know what I say about the red head? I say to hell with her. I say let her drop dead. Cripes, all she is is a body."

Remembering the scene at the *Club Piquant*, Wallace Endicott scowled. "And a clever, scheming mind, Otto. Come, we mustn't underestimate the dear girl. That's been the trouble all along. I should have used Priscilla. Ah, well, I daresay we can recover the lost ground. She's played all her cards, you see."

"She—she has?"

"But come, we're keeping a gracious lady waiting!"

Otto's mind went back to the moment when he'd seen Miss Peabody in a white linen suit step into the grounds. "Class," he breathed, "real class. If I was you, Boss, I'd marry her while I could."

It made Wallace Endicott tremble. As a result, he always cut himself while shaving, and the nervousness made him perspire

as he walked downstairs some half an hour later. He wished it were all as simple as Otto seemed to believe it was. What more could a man want than a pleasant, lazy existence with Sarah on her estate in Virginia? The girl was Beauty itself, with its graciousness, charm, loyalty and good humor. Perhaps she lacked the fire of his first wife, or even that of Elaine Warburton. But she had a mind, by God, and she was a comfort to be with. Not only that but she was a lady, too. The man who possessed her . . .

"She's out at the pool, Mr. Endicott."

Miss Jenson's brisk voice startled him. He turned, peering at her through the gloom of the long, broad hall. "Thank you, Jenson. Incidentally, you might tell Cook I'm dining out."

"Yes, sir."

Was he wrong, or was that a smile lurking in the depths of her fine animal eyes? He studied the contours of her figure in the pale blue uniform.

"And you might have one of the maids see to the guest bedroom next to mine, Jenson. It's possible that Miss Liken will come to spend a few days with us."

"I'll see to it at once, sir."

It was definitely a smile, he decided. He began to wonder if she was ever really shocked by any of the things she heard Otto say.

"You're always very helpful, Jenson. Have I ever told you I'm pleased with the way you run my house? Well, I am. The meals are on time, the rooms are always kept in good order. Miss Peabody agreed with me that you're priceless."

"I do my best, sir." The woman turned to leave, tall and stately, her flaxen hair gleaming momentarily as she passed through a shaft of sunshine.

He wondered why he'd never utilized her good services in other ways. Then, hearing the click of heels out on the terrace, he waddled through the front door.

"About time," Sarah Peabody said, impatiently. She cast a quick look at her watch. "We're invited to dinner at the Leroys. Just a little family gathering."

His red face formed a huge scowl. "Damn it, I don't like them. They're prissy. There's no rich red blood left in any of them. Besides, I want to have dinner with you alone."

Her gray eyes twinkled. "And tell me all about this very sultry romance you're having with Elaine Warburton?"

He followed her down the path to a bench overlooking the broad, ornamented pool. The rolling movement of her hips

enchanted him. How dainty she was, clean-lined and self-contained! His heart began to pound, his fingers began to tingle. He found himself wondering for a moment or two if the railroad was really that important to him. It was one of those opportunities that came along once in a lifetime, true, but what would the possession of more money actually do for him?

"I'd rather not hear about it, Wallace."

She sat down, looking very serious. In the sunlight her face took on a pearl-like beauty. Through the smooth, lucent skin came the pink tinge of her flesh, and her smile was the soft gleam of a pearl, the perfect loveliness a woman's smile should be. He found his case of trembles becoming worse. For the sake of doing something with his hands he picked a pebble from the lawn before him and tossed it into the pool.

"The truth is," she said in her soft drawl, "that I think you have been making a spectacle of yourself, Wallace, what's gotten into you? I thought I understood you. I respected you. You always seemed so sensible. You were one of the few business men I've respected. Then suddenly—" she gestured impatiently with her hand. "But more important, Wallace, what happens to Miss Warburton?"

It startled him. He met her cool gray eyes, then looked off at the copper beeches which marked the northwestern boundary of the estate. He remembered, for some reason, that Maria had ordered the trees to be planted there. That had been twenty-five years ago. "An estate without trees," Maria had said, "just isn't worth owning." His eyes went to the pink marble Aphrodite in the center of the ornamental pool. He shrugged.

"I daresay Miss Warburton will get along. They say the publicity has been good for her career. Otto tells me that she's been offered a television show or something."

She said, coldly: "I was speaking about her heart, Wallace, her hopes, her dreams."

Again she startled him. It was only with a great effort that he managed to keep to himself the information that Miss Elaine Warburton's heart was a chunk of stone.

"A girl who decides in favor of a career can't be a girl seriously in love."

"Jimmy Niles says that you've been trying to use her, Wallace, to further some business deal you've schemed up. Jimmy also says that you planned to drop her the moment you decently could."

It angered him all over again. All in all, it had been a damn good plan. Had the damned redhead not eavesdropped, it prob-

ably would have worked. Niles was clever, but not clever enough to tell what was falsehood and what wasn't. The publicity had been effective. Damn it, even Sarah and Elaine Warburton had been taken in by it. And if she'd not eavesdropped, if she'd not found out about the damned ruby brooch . . .

"Niles always imagines things," he finally said. "He'd be suspicious of his own mother if that woman were still alive."

She stirred on the bench. A light breeze stirred the mass of dark hair framing her soft face, and the breeze blew her honeysuckle scent to his nostrils. He inhaled deeply.

"Niles isn't lending you the money to buy that railroad, Wallace. The Leroys were going to spring that on you. For some reason they thought that was very funny. Strange, I didn't want them to laugh at you."

"Look—"

"I said strange, Wallace, because I find myself laughing at you. What a comic figure you've made of yourself. And for what? Tell me that, won't you?"

"It could be, damn it, that I love her."

Her face went ashen. Her lips moved, but no words came from them. And it suddenly occurred to him that in her way she loved him, and it suddenly occurred to him that if he could just take those words back and forget about the railroad she'd up and marry him. It made him giddy with a breathless delight.

"Or it could be," he rumbled on, "that Niles was right about the scheme."

"You're—you're contemptible!"

"Damn it, this isn't a two-penny game. We could all make a pot of money. But this damned Niles won't be sensible. He keeps thinking I'm the one who prevents you from marrying him. And to think that some people call him a brilliant business man!"

"He happens to be mistaken," said Sarah Peabody firmly.

"He'd make a tidy five per cent on his investment. We might even sell the damned line to one of the other railroads. It's a strategic line, don't you see? It only has a hundred miles of track, but they go through an industrial area, an important one. Other roads have to use the track at so much per ton of freight. And if that damned, snivelling, cry-baby banker had the brains he was born with—"

"Wallace, be quiet! Wallace, be quiet, do you hear?"

White, even whiter, glimmered her face in the sunshine. Her gray eyes were enormous, the pupils had dilated to form huge pools of jetblack horror.

He stirred and picked another pebble from the lawn. A short, rotund figure with an overhanging paunch straining the fabric of his vest, he met her stare, then shrugged.

"Sometimes," he conceded gruffly, "business excites me. I've always been that way. Maybe that's why I've become a successful promoter? When I was a kid my mother used to tell me you succeeded in your work only if you loved your work. I've always loved business. I suspect I always shall. But I did invite you to dinner, didn't I?"

"The Leroys will be sorry to hear you can't have dinner with them. You have a headache, it seems."

"Sarah . . ."

"I think I despise you, Wallace. That girl actually thought you were in love with her. I saw her at the Club one night. If ever a girl looked radiantly happy, she did."

"I—"

"James Niles is an idiot, Wallace. He should have known all along I couldn't possibly be in love with you. Why, you're old enough to be my father!"

"Now you listen to me," he roared.

But Sarah Peabody didn't. Now there were tears in her eyes she wanted to hide.

The easiest way to hide them was to walk away.

In this, as in all other things, Sarah Peabody was both practical and direct.

When Otto came out of the house to announce that Priscilla Liken was available, he found Wallace Endicott alone . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ROSES were duly delivered, and Elaine was very pleased. She tipped the delivery boy a dollar, closed the cottage door on the slanting sheets of rain, then carried the bouquet back to the kitchen to deal with it herself. They were very beautiful roses. In their nest of fresh green ferns they had a rich ruby color that reminded her of the ruby brooch the bastard had bought for the Southern drawl instead of for her. She arranged the flowers in the crystal vase. Feeling generous, she plucked the prettiest one of the lot and handed it across the table to Kitty Forbes.

"Share and share alike, recall?"

The diminutive blonde clapped it to her nose.

"All things except money, of course." Giggling, Elaine picked the vase from the table and carried it out to the living room. She decided the mantel shelf was the place for them, and accordingly placed them there in the position of honor. That made it necessary to junk the bouquet of wildflowers which Ted Underwood had brought to the house last evening. But in the act of carrying them out to the garbage can in the back yard she remembered that Ted was coming over to discuss business. Shrugging, she placed the flowers on the night table in the bedroom. Then all her domestic duties done she went back to her chair in the kitchen where she'd been enjoying coffee and Kitty at the time the front door bell had rung.

"One hundred," she said crisply, picking up the discussion where they'd left off. "And Hannah continues to belong to me."

The answer came back again: "No."

"Damn it, you tell me why? We always got along. Out in California you were never reluctant to share an apartment with me."

"You were thinner then. Men could look at you without feeling it was vital to make you their mistress. So it was a more or less permanent arrangement. This way?" Kitty's golden brows arched. "If it isn't Napoleon it'll be someone else. You stand, as it were, at the pinnacle of your beauty. So the wolves will yelp and off you'll go to shack up with someone else, leaving a poor, unfortunate dancer stuck with an expensive apartment."

Discovering her coffee was cold, Elaine scowled. A tantalizing figure in a maroon velvet housecoat she got up from the table

and picked the steaming Silex from the stove. She filled a fresh cup thoughtfully. "You could be wrong, you know. Ted says things are working out nicely. He says there's a company that wants to televise the show once a week. I might make as much as another five hundred. A thousand a week would be good enough for me."

Kitty, however, knew better. She'd met all kinds in the course of her brief career as a Madame out on the West Coast. She'd learned to spot the greedy ones as well as the stupid ones. There'd never be enough money for Elaine. When she had a million she'd chase after the second million with the same cold-blooded determination she'd chased after the first. Which, of course, was why Elaine was getting ahead while she herself was more or less standing still. Wave a dollar bill under Elaine's nose and there was practically nothing she wouldn't do.

"Now you take the case of Balke," she sighed. "A very rich and generous man, Mr. Balke."

"Kitty!"

Amused, Kitty sprang gracefully from the chair and went into Elaine's bedroom. She pulled open the lower bureau drawer and took out the girl's jewel box. She opened it and plucked a pair of beautiful diamond earrings from the purple plush. As Elaine came in curiously, Kitty laughed. "You were about to say what?"

Elaine sat down on the bed. She shrugged. "It's cheaper than buying the damned things, you must admit that."

"A bluenose might argue the point with you. Not being a bluenose, I return said earrings to the treasure chest and keep my intelligent mouth shut."

"Or you may put them on, Kitty, and keep them."

Blue eyes bulged.

"That's how much I like you, you see." Elaine kicked her slippers off and punched a pillow into position at the headboard of the double bed. She settled back with a little sigh. Now the rain was teeming down, making a drum of the roof and a quagmire of the road. Presently the road would be a problem, yet she rather liked the rain even though it was deepening the mud outside with every fat, flashing drop. "Napoleon should have remembered that, Kitty. I mean, he should have remembered I'm always loyal to people who've treated me nicely."

"Speaking of whom . . ."

Green eyes danced. "He's not a bad sort, do you know that? Kitty, do you know why he sent the roses?"

Kitty hesitated, then dropped the earrings into the pocket of her blue suit. "No doubt because he loves you."

"It's a tribute, Kitty. Wallace is funny that way. To him it's a kind of game, you see. He'll knock you senseless if he can. But if you score a point he'll always congratulate you."

"Tell me, is the guy nuts?"

Elaine shrugged. What constituted sanity, she wondered. Was Kitty Forbes sane when she worked at a job she'd never be very good at? Was Wallace insane when he tried to corner a lush New England territory?

"Ted says he is. Ted says he's got some kind of success complex. Ted says—"

"It's nice to have money, things. It's very nice, Kitty."

"But sooner or later a person should start worrying about other items. Now you take Elaine Warburton, for example."

"God forbid!"

A thump sounded on the front door. Then the bell rang stridently.

Kitty glanced at her watch and heaved a pensive sigh. "Carter. He wants to take me to dinner and hold hands. Will you tell me something? Will you tell me why I only attract the paupers?"

"You have such a pure heart, you see. Men look into your eyes and find all their dreams there. You should marry Carter Nickson. He'll be at the top some day. Even Balke says so."

"About Balke," said Kitty. Her mind was like that. It might wander from the path now and again, but invariably it got back to the place from which it had started. "You might, you see, decide to shack up with him. And there I'd be, stuck with an expensive apartment." She walked into the living room. It was a snug, well-furnished room. "Besides, why don't you stay here? You can afford to pay the rent. Five hundred a month isn't a fortune, but on the other hand—"

The bell rang again. But this time it didn't stop ringing until Carter Nickson had been let in. "A man," he growled, "could drown out there. Hi, Elaine. Mmmm, not bad, not bad at all."

"No you don't!" whooped Kitty Forbes.

A smile lit his long, lean face. "The tribute due a star, my dear. Who knows? One of these days she may find someone to back a musical I'm writing."

"I might." Elaine met his black eyes thoughtfully. They were steady eyes, the eyes of a man sure of himself. Unconsciously she lifted her head and inhaled deeply. She wished that Ted had Carter's strength, his quiet, unostentatious determination to succeed. "How's it coming along?"

The burly shoulders shrugged in the dull green Harris tweed

jacket. "Don't know the end of it yet," he drawled. "Question! Does Cinderella land her millionaire, or does she sink back to the gutter from whence she came."

She hated him suddenly. Always the wisecracks, always the subtle insults!

"Never wonder about Cinderella, Carter."

Kitty scowled. "Hey, do you two always have to leap at one another's throats?"

"I remind her of a rat she knew," Carter explained easily. He chuckled and gave Kitty a push toward the door. "We were going to have dinner, remember?"

While Elaine was still trying to think up a clever retort, he bowed gallantly. The door slammed shut and she was alone again. Sighing, she went back to the chair before the fireplace. The haunting fragrance of the roses impinged on her awareness and she studied them thoughtfully. An invitation to begin Round Two, or a little suggestion that a telephone call from her would be welcome. She shook her copper-red head. The damned trouble with the bastard was that you never knew what was going on in that resourceful brain of his. Was he cooking up some piece of deviltry now? She wouldn't want to take bets he wasn't. He'd not made a fortune because he'd learned to accept defeats with a philosophical smile. "Defeats," he'd once confided, "are a stench in my nostrils." No. For a railroad his mind would connive overtime, just as her own mind had done from the first moment she'd met him.

She chuckled, recalling that night while the rain thickened on the windowpanes around her. What a strange sight he'd made in the shabby dressing room of Anastasia's Place in Greenwich Village. Attired in evening clothes, a pleated box cape slung over his shoulders, he'd reminded her of pictures she'd seen of the stage-door Johnnys of the Gay Nineties. His manners had been old world, too. Drunk though he'd certainly been, he'd managed to push himself to his feet to deliver a bow of a sort.

Flowers in his hand. Red roses, no less!

A cameo brooch pinned to the green tissue paper.

And then it had begun.

"Age twenty-three, height five feet nine inches. Bust thirty-five, hips thirty-five, thighs—"

She'd had to leap for. rd at that point because he'd wobbled so far forward she'd been afraid he'd fall flat on his fat red face. Somehow she'd managed to get him back to the stool of the make-up table. With a sudden impulse she'd raised a bare leg and set her slippered foot down on his lap. "You forgot to

measure the ankles, Pop. They're supposed to be important, too."

"Profession," he'd intoned, "harlotry."

It had shocked her. Mouthed as he'd mouthed it, the word had been an obscenity. In an utter revulsion of feeling she'd gone to the door and beckoned to Turk, the bouncer. "Throw it out," she'd ordered.

Turk had leaped forward to comply.

Then seemingly from the nowhere a wisp of a man with a shock of white hair had appeared. The little matter of a knife had halted Turk in his tracks.

Behind her, the fatty had laughed.

"Permit me to introduce you to Otto Wagenknecht," he'd rumbled. "Otto defends me whenever I wander through the purlieus of vice."

"Geez!" Turk had moaned. "Geez!"

She shivered, hearing the sounds of those moans again. She wondered what would have happened if the Turk hadn't cracked. Would Otto have slit his stomach open?

But that hadn't been necessary. The Turk had cracked, and the first thing she'd known, there she'd been sipping champagne with the old pirate in the dressing room. Then Kitty had come in to accept a fifty-dollar bill and suddenly everything had begun to add up.

The beginning, the beginning, the beginning . . .

She sighed again and shivered in a sudden draft. She looked at the wood heaped in the fireplace, then stiffened.

"Lord love a duck!" she murmured. "Lord love a poor, waiting duck!"

She hurried up the hall to Hannah's room. She gave the panel a quick knock, then twisted the knob. "Will you be furious, darling, if I say that I forgot you?"

"I would probably punch you flat."

She met the testy gray eyes, and chuckled. "Next time you'll know better than to run. Arthur, it wouldn't have mattered if Kitty had seen you. She knows, anyway. She even knew about the earrings."

"My damned wife . . ."

She wondered why they always blamed their wives.

"What Mrs. Balke doesn't know wouldn't grieve her, Arthur. And Kitty's this way. She's never surprised or scandalized, and she never tells tales. I'd trust Kitty with my life. You dope, why do you think Kitty and I have stuck together all these years? We understand one another *and* the world."

He sat up on the bed, a rugged male figure in blue corduroy trousers and a colorful woolen sport shirt. He smoothed his

rumpled black hair as a growl of thunder sounded over the Bay. "I ought to get back to the city. You ought to come along with me. If this storm keeps on you'll be marooned."

She decided that didn't matter after all. "Kitty's answer was no. She's afraid I'll shack up with you, you see, and then she'd be stuck with the rent."

The thought sent tingles down to his toes. The simple truth of the matter was that he'd never had a better piece than Elaine Warburton. When passion was on her mind it dominated her whole body. Maybe it meant too much to her, or perhaps it was a kind of disease she had. But still it was nice for the man who happened to enjoy her interest at the moment. He played with the thought as he went back to the living room. Ultimately, would it matter if his wife did find out? The worst she could do was divorce him, and wasn't a divorce what he wanted? And if he were to transfer all his bank accounts to another state . . .

"It might work out nicely. It might be a lot of fun, come to think of it."

She watched him kneel before the fire. "I'm doing all right, Arthur. I have money in the bank, clothes in my closets, nice jewels to wear when I want to put on a splash. I'll do better in time, too."

The trouble was, he thought, that she'd gone and won her independence. If the publicity hadn't helped Endicott, it was certainly good for her. He studied her as she dropped gracefully to the bright-cushioned couch. "It's always possible to come a cropper. Especially when you're dealing with an Endicott."

"Then I'll think of you. I'll come to you in my rags, my defeat. I'll plead with you. I'll hurl myself at your feet. And because you're a nice man who likes his sex wild, you'll take pity on me and take me in out of the cold."

The word reminded him. He struck a match and touched it to the tinder. For a few minutes there was more smoke than flame. It billowed into the living room and made them both gasp and sputter for breath. But after she'd adjusted the damper the fireplace began to draw. A spear of orange flame glowed in the smoke, then another. Then with a roar that sent sparks shooting up the chimney the fire caught. A pleasant warmth pushed into the room. Grunting, he went back to the couch and sat down beside her.

"You're very lovely, Elaine, do you know that? You always remind me of wild roses, for some queer reason. Incidentally, did Endicott send those roses?"

"I think he was congratulating me because I've scored a couple of points."

It vexed him. "Damn it, you're not playing a game! The man is out for a fortune! Can't you understand that?"

"So am I."

She stirred, crossing her legs and resting back comfortably against the cushioned arm of the couch. Within the maroon velvet housecoat her bosom arched prettily. He remembered that on occasion her body could be a storm of delight. He bit his lip. "Stop teasing me. I'm your employer, remember?"

"About that television offer, Arthur. No dice."

He swallowed. He began to suspect that Wallace Endicott had met his match in her.

"In the first place, Arthur, it would tie me down. Suppose I were to get an offer from some other club? A much better deal, for instance, than you give me?"

"At five hundred a week, Elaine, you're doing all right."

She turned dreamy eyes to the fire. Her lips twitched, but she managed to contain her amusement. "The trouble is, you see, that one is young and beautiful only for a handful of years. And popularity is such a peculiar thing. The same crowd that cheers you today ignores you tomorrow. Leaving an unfortunate girl with her own way to make just where?"

"Before you came to me . . ."

"I know, Arthur, I know. There I was in rags. My body simply offended you. You took one look at me and screamed to Ted to take me out of your sight."

He deliberated, a square-jawed man with a stocky body, hard gray eyes. "As you've just said," he murmured, "popularity disappears as quickly as it comes. What sort of deal did you have in mind?"

"Oh, fifteen hundred a week or so. I have to save for my old age, don't I?"

He jumped from the couch with a remarkable display of agitation. He paced to and fro on the Oriental rug, a caged lion wearying of the cage.

"Did it ever occur to you that Endicott can apply pressure? Did it ever occur to you that he might make things tough for the fellow who hired you?"

She studied the roses, the beautiful, beautiful roses. Was that the deviltry the old bastard was planning? But her mind rejected the whole thing as absurd. In the first place, it would be too costly to please a man who loved to hold onto his money. In the second place, it would be well-nigh impossible. New York wasn't the only city in the world. The publicity had spread to the sticks. There'd always be people who'd leap at the chance

to employ the Cinderella girl. In that respect Ted had done a good job, a damned good job.

"And did it ever occur to you," asked Arthur Balke, "that taxes would take most of it, anyway?"

"One thousand, and you pay the taxes. There, if that isn't fair I'd like to know what is."

"I'll think about it."

"On a short term basis, Arthur? With a clause that gives each of us the freedom to cancel it if it doesn't work out?"

The tension drained out of him. "Damn it, why didn't you say that in the beginning? My only interest is that I don't get stuck."

"And the second clause would be that Kitty sticks with the show."

He decided that was why he liked her. She might be hell on wheels but she had loyalty to her friends. He sat down again and reached for the soft hand on her lap. "And if I say it's a deal, what then?"

The green eyes grew enormous. "Arthur, aren't you ever ashamed of yourself?"

"I could ask you the same question."

"It's different with me. I was born poor, you see, dirt poor. I'm a Yuma girl, Arthur. My folks never had a hundred dollars in the bank at any time in their lives. That makes a difference."

"That's your defense?"

"My what?"

"Surely you're not proud of yourself? Other girls have been poor, but they didn't peddle themselves."

"Oh, those. Arthur, isn't it pathetic? Those are the creatures who are so servile when I pop into the stores to buy things. I'm sure their virginity helps them to pay the rent."

"To live with themselves, at any rate."

"I live with myself." She snickered. "And I notice, dear Arthur, that I don't exactly offend you."

"Maybe because I'm crazy?"

"I choose to believe it's because you're sweet, nice."

She rose, stretching. "I suppose apartment hunting can wait. Arthur, would you like to carry me to my room?"

He hesitated.

Her hands went to the zipper of the housecoat.

As a blast of thunder reverberated over the house, he scooped the willing body into his arms and laboriously carried it up the hall to the bedroom.

"Arthur, am I pretty? Look at me, Arthur!"

Endicott, he thought, was a nut. What more did he want?

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FRAGRANCE of more roses greeted her when she stepped into her dressing room early the following evening. Furious hazel eyes were on hand to greet her, too, but she ignored these as she looked through the roses for a card. To her glee she found one this time, a stiff, creamy pasteboard with the word *Love* splashed across it in heavy purple ink. It took her breath away. Definitely the old pirate's mind was conniving overtime. What was the nature of the deviltry? Still ignoring the hazel eyes she went back to the Lanai Room and made her way to the bar, through the tangle of rattan furniture and customers. A pensive figure in a quiet blue dress she slipped onto the stool at the end of the bar and ordered a Barbados Rum Punch. It was strong, and deliciously cool. After a day spent tramping around New York in quest of an apartment it was exactly what her system seemed to want. She chuckled with a sense of comfortable happiness as Carter Nickson came wandering over to plunk himself down on the adjoining stool. "Care to have one on me composer?"

He thought a sarong was the proper garment for her. And he thought that the colorful diorama of a Hawaiian scene there along the back wall of the bar was the place for her to be. Though the skin was pale and the eyes were green, there was an animal loveliness to her that he'd always associated with the dusky island girls far across the Pacific. He wagged his massive head.

"You take the cake," he muttered. If the sentiment was trite there was no doubting the sincerity which had inspired it. He nodded to Earl, the barkeep, and ordered a rum punch to keep her company. From the inner pocket of his tuxedo jacket he drew a slim, gold cigarette case. He placed one between her lips and lighted it with the flame of a gold lighter. The hand was very steady. At forty, it would seem, he had splendid control of his nerves.

"Kitty tells me you're abandoning the cottage."

"Common sense. In October everyone will be looking for new places to live. This way I beat the crowd. And it's such a long distance to drive every day. And it's hard on my friends when they want to visit me."

He smiled.

She beat him to the punch. "Such friends as I have, which certainly aren't many. But the quality is good, Carter, you'll have to concede that. You couldn't ask for finer persons than Kitty, could you? And believe it or not, there are quite a few others."

From the Lanai Room came the first chords of the orchestra. As though a great many persons had been waiting for the dance hour to begin the crowd began to thin. Now there were empty tables along the far wall under the imitation palms. He picked her drink from the bar quietly and carried it to the corner table. With great gallantry he pulled the table out and assisted her to the padded bench affixed to the wall.

"You couldn't ask for a finer friend then Kitty." He hesitated, nibbling on his lip.

"Did she give you hell?"

He thought that was a marvel of understatement. The date he'd had with Kitty last had been a battle almost from the moment he'd led Kitty from the cottage to his car. For a few minutes Kitty had been an icicle on the front seat beside him. He'd disliked that, but once the icicle had thawed he'd wished she'd become one again.

"Do you *have* to insult her, Carter?"

"She makes me sick."

"She's the finest friend I've ever had!"

And how Kitty's eyes had flashed as she'd said those words, how the smoke of anger had seemed to come curling from those big blue eyes. It had seemed for a moment as though she were going to claw his face, at the very least. Then with an almost superhuman effort she'd dropped her lovely hands back to the contours of her lovely thighs. She'd looked out at the driving rain and laughed huskily.

"When I was in jail," she'd said flatly, "Elaine was the only person who cared a damn. The flatfeet were looking for something to pin on her, too, but that didn't stop her from coming to see me every day. Yes, and when they let me out she was the one who supported me until I could get going again."

He'd continued to drive through the rain, but it was still a mystery to him how he'd managed to keep the car on the wet, slippery road. The words had shocked. The words had screwed his nerves tight and put a strange mist before his eyes. He'd always suspected that between them, Kitty and Elaine had covered a lot of territory and done all sorts of things. But he'd

never guessed that they'd learned something about the interiors of jail. The thought had made him sick.

Then Kitty had plunged on, telling him more things about Elaine that he'd not known. It had been a weird experience. It had been like seeing her bones and mind being laid bare, one by one, tissue by tissue. At twelve she'd been raped. At fourteen her parents had died and she'd been sent to a state orphanage. At eighteen she'd stepped penniless into the world to light into the business of earning her living as a laundress. And of course there'd been the usual lecher to demand the usual price from a good-looking kid who had to keep even a rotten job.

"Is it any wonder," Kitty had demanded at this point, "that she thinks the way she does now?"

He supposed, studying Elaine's soft face, her lovely clothes, that the rest had been inevitable. No one to help her but herself, no one to teach her the world wasn't as wretched as it must have seemed to her to be. So there'd been sex and there'd been hate. So to her the world had been a jungle through which to claw her way as best she could. And now, there she sat, an expert at clawing. From Yuma she'd beat her way to Los Angeles, where she'd met Kitty. And they'd whored, half-starved, and connived together. And gradually they'd worked their way across the continent, picking up work in show business when they could, peddling their bodies when that seemed advisable. And always the dream goading the redhead on, the dream of wealth, the dream of things. Things!

He studied the bracelet on her wrist, the bold necklace about her neck.

What was it that Kitty had said? Oh, yes. She only accepted gifts she could pawn if worse came to worst.

He scowled, wishing he'd not argued the matter with Kitty. Who the hell had he been to condemn without trial? No wonder Kitty had sizzled him but good! No wonder the damn date had been warfare of a kind from the moment it had begun to the moment Kitty had risen dramatically from the chair to stalk from the restaurant!

"Sometimes," he said to Elaine moodily, "I talk before I think. It's always been a wretched habit of mine. It's gotten me into trouble a number of times."

She laughed soundlessly. Her hand went gracefully to her glass. She took another sip of the punch, her eyes gleaming above the rim of the glass. "Kitty's nice, Carter. Sure, she's batted around. No apologies for that, either. Life is that way.

Something happens and off you go along a road you mightn't choose if things were different. But Kitty's not wild. She'd make a good wife."

"Look, it's none of my business, but why can't you be satisfied with what you've got now?"

This time the laugh wasn't soundless. It rippled melodiously above the music of the distant orchestra. "Has Kitty been making you feel sorry for me?"

He clenched his teeth. This time, he told himself, he wouldn't lose his temper. After all, she'd stuck to Kitty through everything.

"But that's nonsense, Carter. And it's insulting, too. Look at me. Do I seem to be a person in need of pity? Carter, it's like a glorious dream coming true. Arthur has agreed to pay me a thousand a week. Think of it! And it's just the beginning! I'm a name now, after a fashion. There'll be television one of these days. Maybe I'll even hit the movies. Carter, I'm on the road to success!"

"Ted?"

The lush eyelashes fluttered. Down came the glass to the table with a bang that made all the ice in it tinkle. "Great day in the morning, I forgot. He's in my dressing room. He's mad as a man who's just had his face slapped!"

"He loves you, Elaine."

She met the glittering black eyes. It seemed strange to think of him as Kitty's boy friend. Change his coloring from white to Mexican brown and he'd almost be the double of the bastard who'd given her a beating one night on the banks of the Colorado. She shivered.

"No man loves any woman, Carter. It's all a question of flesh. If that sounds cynical, I'm sorry. But as I see it, it happens to be the truth."

"You might be seeing it all with the wrong set of eyes. Look, why don't you give yourself a break and marry Ted?"

"He'll always be poor, you see." And now, though she was unaware of it, a glitter came to her own eyes. "Listen, Carter, it's the money that counts. I don't care a damn what others say, that's the truth. Without money you're a little worm that can be stepped on and destroyed at will. And people can do horrible things to you when you're poor. And that's experience talking, real experience."

He frowned. "Kitty told me. Look, I'm apologizing. I've been rotten."

"Because I've helped Kitty?" She tossed her head. "Kitty and I are friends. Why shouldn't I help her?"

The bristling defiance amused him. "Look, you don't have to justify decent behavior. It's no crime to help your friends."

"It's not weakness, you understand? If I had to junk her I would. That's only intelligent. You have to take care of number one first. That's the law of the jungle, Carter, and it's the one law on earth I happen to respect and keep."

"Still, I'm grateful."

She shrugged. She wondered how she'd gotten involved in this ridiculous conversation with him. She'd not wanted conversation, which was why she'd left Ted alone in the dressing room. She'd come out here to drink, to think. The roses! The card! What the devil was the old pirate up to? By now he should have sent Otto to see her. By now a proposition of a sort should have been forthcoming. After all, he did want the railroad, didn't he? And Niles wouldn't lend him the money, would he, unless Niles was sure of the Southern Drawl?

"You men," she raged. "You men make me sick, every damn one of you!"

He shrugged. He'd said what he'd come to say. Now the bar was filling up again, and now she wasn't especially attractive to look at.

There was the desire on her face, and the damned greed in her eyes. It sickened him. He couldn't condemn her now because he thought the greed was natural, all things considered. But he couldn't approve, either. He got up from the chair. He looked at his wrist watch and sighed. "Maybe you'd better get dressed. Oh, one little criticism. In the volcano number. It isn't necessary to ham it up all over the stage. Listen, the secret of good acting is underplaying your part. Believe it or not, a gasp is much more eloquent than a scream."

She nodded. She'd remember it, too. That was another of her good points, come to think of it. She took direction. She might not like criticism, being human, but she took directions like a real pro.

He sighed, watching her leave. He wished she'd be a sensible kid and marry Ted. Ted was okay, he thought. He was a clever agent, and he loved her. The agent and the man would make her happy if she'd just settle down and give herself a real break.

She went back through the Lanai Room. She found that the place had filled up, and that people recognized her even when she wasn't dressed to wow. At one of the tables a dumpy man with a fringe of silver hair leaped to his feet. He shook her hand

gravely, and solemnly introduced her to his wife, his daughter and her boy friend. A menu was thrust into her hand, a pen. And that gave others ideas. She had to sign her name a good dozen times before Arthur, spotting her in the tangle of eager humanity, came hurrying over to rescue her. He chuckled as he led her backstage.

"They keep calling for reservations. Look, about that television deal."

"Nope."

"Ted Underwood thinks it's a good idea. Look, this thing will run its course. But television will create another clientele. People will get the habit of turning on the show. Then when they think of a nightclub they'll think of us. You see?"

She spotted Kitty in the dressing room of the hula girls. "Arthur, we've a show to do, remember?"

Then the door of her own dressing room opened and Ted stepped out into the broad hall. Now his lips were as angry as the hazel eyes. "Let's talk," he muttered. He looked at his watch. "There's time."

"If it's business, Ted, no."

He looked at her curiously. Then, peculiarly, he smiled. In an odd, self-deprecating tone he went on: "Agent has to chat with his client some time, Elaine."

She studied Arthur's face, then sighed. With sinuous grace she squeezed by Ted and led the way into her dressing room. She noticed that all the lights but one had been turned off, and that he'd opened the window to the late August breeze. The shadows of the curtains fluttered on the distant wall, mysterious, unreal. They struck her, for some reason, as presaging evil, and with a self-conscious laugh she turned on the mirror lights of her vanity table.

"You sound ominous, Ted. Your voice simply reeks of issues and threats and ultimatums."

"Let me put it this way. The contract stinks."

Arthur Balke stiffened. He said, sharply, "Those are pretty strong words, Underwood. Elaine approved the terms herself."

"That's why artists have agents. Artists are such rotten business people." An angular figure in tweeds, Ted went over to the chaise lounge. He smiled wryly. "In the first place, Elaine, a contract with that sort of release clause in it isn't worth the paper it's written on. You damn fool, contracts are supposed to be protection. If he can dump you the moment the take falls off, then why bother to have one?"

"Because I needed a talking point, Ted."

He saw her smile in the mirror. He saw the soft line of her shoulders, the pink-and-cream of her face, the luster of her copper-red hair in the glare of the forty-watt bulbs. He became aware of her physical allure, and for a moment it was difficult for him to keep his mind on business. He turned to Arthur Balke. "I'd like to talk to her alone, if you don't mind."

Now the face of Arthur Balke ceased to be fatuous. The hard gray eyes gleamed, the man's chin thrust forward belligerently. "You see here," he barked. "It's a damn good deal. A thousand a week, when just a year ago she was lucky to earn four hundred a month! Don't forget we were partially instrumental in helping to build her up."

Ted didn't raise his voice. "Would you rather that she didn't appear tonight?"

There was an exclamation. Then in a thunderclap of silence Arthur Balke turned and left.

She turned slowly on the padded bench. Automatically she took off her jacket and kicked off her shoes. "Make it brief, Ted. I've had a long, hard day."

"You damn fool, did it ever occur to you that I'd go to work on other clubs? Did it ever occur to you that I'd talk with television people?"

She unbuttoned her blouse, then rose to step from her skirt. With incredible modesty she then went behind the screen and took her lingerie.

"Or isn't the career important to you anymore? Is that the whole story? The talking point you mentioned. You just wanted a lush contract to flaunt in Endicott's face?"

"Ted, I never said I'd marry you. You can't ever accuse me of leading you on. I told you in the beginning that possessions were my goal; money, jewels, interesting stuff like that."

"Damn you, stop laughing at me!"

She appeared in a green wrapper. She walked close to him, so close he could feel the animal heat of her body. "I like it this way, Ted. Do you mind if I continue to control things?"

"The Blue Bonnet people were talking about fifteen hundred."

"This deal is net. Arthur pays the taxes."

He stared. "He does?"

"Naturally, you collect on the gross. You idiot, did you think I was completely crazy?"

He sucked in his breath. Faint but distinctive came the scent of her perfume. "Tonight," he muttered, "we'll talk . . ."

CHAPTER SIX

THERE WERE other "talks" in the two weeks that followed. It seemed to her that every time she looked around there he was, adoring her with his eyes, reaching for her with his warm, trembling hands. Hannah complained, her own body complained. "After all," she told herself, "there are more important things than sex." And yet she welcomed the eyes, the hands. When Ted was on very good behavior he was the nicest man she knew, and throughout those two weeks he was very careful to be at his best. He helped her look for an apartment, he took her on sight-seeing trips around the city. They went to the top of the Statue of Liberty, and also looked down at fantastical New York from the observatory of the Empire State building.

Dashing, happy, he didn't neglect Kitty, either. He formed the habit of picking Kitty up every morning sharply at eleven and driving her over to his place for breakfast. And presently Carter Nickson made it a foursome, albeit exclaiming vehemently that a composer who worked on a musical all night long very badly needed his rest.

As Kitty put it, it was very pleasant "kid stuff." In fact, she also added, "The whole thing's a pitch if I ever saw one."

Object, matrimony? Elaine supposed that it was. And her mind and body complained about that, too, yet her ego welcomed the "pitch" just as the animal in her welcomed the eyes, the trembling hands. She found it very agreeable to be adored. She found it almost incredible that a nice guy like Ted could overlook her past and even think in terms of including her in his future. As August merged into September she began to play with the thought of shacking up with him.

Which thought, fantastically, had the effect of scandalizing the girl who'd once been the youngest Madame out on the Pacific Coast. She clinked her coffee cup to the saucer and stared with big, round blue eyes. "You're crazy! You're stark, staring mad!"

Elaine went to the window and looked down at the traffic flowing by on the Avenue of the Americas. She hated the noise, the confusion. She wished Ted and Carter would come along in Ted's Chevrolet. If she was ever to leave the damned cottage she'd have to get her things packed; and if she was ever to get

back to the city where she belonged she'd have to make her decision once and for all. She let the curtains fall and turned back to Kitty Forbes. "What's crazy about it, will you tell me that?"

Kitty crossed her legs Turkish fashion on the big double bed. She was in green flannel lounging pajamas, and on this sunlit Sunday morning she was looking her best. Her hair was fluffed prettily about her thin, elfin face, her blue eyes shone. "Because he loves you, that's why. Because he's too nice a guy to do a thing like that too, that's why."

"I'm not exactly a shrew, Kitty. It's conceivable that he'd enjoy the experience. And at least it would solve the apartment problem. Damn it, I can't stay out there forever. Now that I'm paying the rent the place is too expensive. Besides, Hannah's missing the city. She's even talking of quitting!"

Kitty reached out for the coffee pot on the cocktail table she'd dragged in from the living room. She filled her cup carefully, then dumped sugar into the liquid generously. She didn't know why, but suddenly she was furious with Elaine Warburton.

"You make me sick," she exclaimed. "I wish I had your figure, but just the same you make me sick."

Elaine sat down on the blue mohair armchair. The idea continued to intrigue, despite Kitty's obvious disapproval. Lord knew that Ted's apartment was big enough to accommodate Hannah and herself, as well as him. And with a little fixing up here and there it could be a pleasant home, too.

"It's all I can give him, you see."

Then Kitty understood why she was angry with the Body. The trouble with Elaine was that she was a jungle girl, still. The push was still in her, the savagery. The end was still the same, and that was how it would always be, no matter how many bucks the girl made a week. "And I'm tired of conniving," thought Kitty Forbes. "It was all right when we had to do it, but not now!"

"He'll always be poor, you see."

Kitty jumped from the bed. "Damn it, will you stop harping on that subject?" Her face grew lobster-red. She snatched her shoe from the floor and childishly threw it at the distant wall. It gouged a piece from the gay wallpaper, of course, then thumped back to the floor from which it had been picked. Kitty inhaled tremulously. "It should have been your head."

Elaine sat looking at her, surprised for the second time that morning. Then, to her astonishment, it occurred to her that Kitty Forbes had changed. Why, she scarcely resembled the

hungry dancer she'd been when they'd hit New York after three years of willy-nilly wandering about the continent! Where was the old cynical look that had always been in Kitty's eyes? Where was the old up-and-at-'em spirit?

"Great day in the morning," she breathed. "Kitty, you've let them soften you up! You've let the composer change you!"

Kitty reached down for her other shoe. In the act of raising her arm to throw it she paused, however, an odd expression wrinkling her graceful forehead. She turned as a truck lumbered by on the street below to make an awful racket. She walked daintily back to the bed. The springs creaked as she sat down, the shoe made a little bumping sound as she dropped it back to the floor. There was a long silence as a September breeze pushed in through the window to dissipate the smoke of Elaine's cigarette.

Elaine cleared her throat, troubled by the long silence.

"You love him, don't you? That's what's made the change?"

"I want to get drunk," Kitty muttered. "I want to get roaring drunk, then tell him to drop dead."

"You used to laugh at his sort. I remember San Francisco. Remember the eager beaver who had a little grocery store? Remember how you told him off one day while you were down at the Golden Gate from the bridge?"

"I remember."

It was said in a very odd tone. Now there was a sheepish smile on Kitty's lips, now shame burned in her cheeks. "I was a vicious tramp those days, wasn't I? Anything that was good I laughed at."

Elaine's throat felt dry. She felt cold down to the tips of her toes. Good lord, she thought, is *that* what it does to you?

"Me and my big brain," Kitty snorted contemptuously. "The grocer was doing me the favor. But I was too smart to see that. Oh, I was a smart girl, all right."

Elaine wanted to dress and leave. She stubbed her cigarette out and went to her lingerie on the chair. "A smart girl would tell Carter to drop dead, too. The world's full of composers, Kitty. It's full of clean, earnest young men. Look around you. Knock on any door in this building and you'll probably find a woman who married one of them. And look at her hands. Then look at the cheap clothes she's wearing. Then listen to the babble of her brats. A pretty life, don't you think?"

"He makes me feel good, damn you!"

"And on and on forever, the life goes. Maybe a couple of new outfits once or twice a year. Movies on Saturday nights, sleep

late on Sundays, then back to the good old, wonderful old routine. Oh, but we mustn't forget the vacation, must we? Two glorious weeks of independence. Cheap hotels, cheap resorts. How exciting! What a rich and wonderful existence!"

"Shut up! Damn you, shut up!"

Elaine stepped into the baby blue panties. A shaft of living gold in the sunshine she studied the reflection of her figure in the mirror. There was more fat on the abdomen again. The two weeks had played hell with her figure. There'd been too damned many hours in bed. Too much of the sightseeing had been done from the cushioned comfort of an automobile. A walk was what she needed, a long walk along the beach in the bracing sea air. She put on her brassiere, then sat down to pull on her stockings.

"If it's so wonderful," she asked, "then why do my words bother you? Surely you don't have doubts! That would be awful. Love is supposed to be positive, if not very intelligent."

But Kitty had regained control. A wry smile twitched her saucy red lips. "It's just that I hated to hear you mouthing absurdities. You used to be more sensible. At least you used to talk of marrying after you'd made your pile. Strange, isn't it? Now I don't care about the money at all. I look at you and feel sorry for you and a hell of a lot richer than you'll ever be."

Elaine smoothed the stockings about her calves and thighs. She gartered them to her panties and reached for her skirt. The sudden ringing of the doorbell hastened the business of dressing. While Kitty answered and made the men comfortable in the living room, she finished the chore of readying herself for Ted's delectation.

Freshly shaven, resplendent in new Autumn suits, the two men sprang from their chairs.

"I'm starved," Ted announced.

"I'll die of starvation," chimed in Carter, moodily.

They reminded her of a couple of college juniors Kitty and she had once double-dated. And suddenly the whole thing palled. She looked at her wristwatch and grimaced. "Hannah wants me out at the cottage, Ted. If you'll drive me to the station I'll just make the noon train."

"Huh?" The hazel eyes grew quizzical. "But we're supposed to go on a picnic this afternoon."

"I find that I don't feel well, Ted. The truth is, I've been missing too much sleep. Carter, you understand?"

The black eyes met hers, a quick cynical smile came to the strong full lips. "I always understand, Elaine."

Then it hit Ted that the interlude was over. His face went

white. Almost of their own volition his hand went into his jacket pocket to fondle the plush box he'd brought along. His breathing deepened to hoarseness. "Listen," he whispered, "you can't do that to me."

Carter met Kitty's horrified eyes, then shrugged. He dropped a casual arm around Ted's middle and led him to the door "Easy does it," he suggested. He opened the door, darted a murderous look at Elaine's serene face, then gave Ted a little push out in the hall.

Kitty Forbes all but exploded.

"You filthy slut," she raged. "You dirty, hurting whore!"

Elaine went back to the bedroom. She opened the bureau drawer and took her clothes out. From the small closet she yanked her suitcase and methodically began to pack.

Around the room Kitty paced, the color deepening in her cheeks with each passing second. "Throwing everything away! Ruining your whole damned life, and not even feeling sorry about it. He loves you! Can't you get that through your thick skull? He doesn't care a damn what you've been—he loves you!"

"The orchestra should be playing *Hearts and Flowers.*"

"You get the hell out of here!"

Elaine peered at her sideways. "The trouble with you, Kitty, is that you always sell yourself a bill of goods. There, that's why I keep going ahead while you stand still. The grocer in San Francisco, Carter here, the butcher in Milwaukee, the oysterman down in Maryland. They come, they go, but you never realize that until you've set yourself up for the awful letdown."

Kitty snatched a vase from the chest of drawers. She advanced menacingly. "Just say one word more. Go ahead. I dare you to say just one word more!"

Elaine finished her packing and snapped the suitcase shut. Giving the vase a wide berth she went to the living room door. She glanced around the small room with its cheap instalment plan furniture. She saw the two weeks with a startling clarity, and now she began to shiver.

"Not for me," she said huskily. "You damn fool, go ahead and settle for second best. But don't ask me to play that way. Look at me. Take a good look at me! I have brains! I have flesh! There's nothing I can't have if I want it! And if you think I'll be a poor man's slob of a wife, then you're crazy. I've had enough of poverty. Now I'm my own boss, and that's how it'll always be!"

Kitty gasped. "You—you *are* crazy!"

But Elaine had the last word, as usual. She gave the cheap furniture a withering glance. "Not that crazy, Kitty. Really, not that crazy, at all!"

She hurried downstairs to the street. A cab dipped in toward the curb as the driver spotted the suitcase in her hand. But as it developed, the cab wasn't necessary.

"Class," breathed a husky voice behind her, "real, real class."

She continued walking downtown toward the subway station on West Third Street.

"Always the class. Put you in rags, and you'd still be classier than the Southern Drawl."

She developed a sudden thirst for coffee. She saw that the cafeteria was open across the street and jay-walked across the Avenue of Americas.

"If you will permit me," the husky voice said quickly. While she waited the wisp of man with white hair swung the door open for her. She wondered if he still carried the knife. She supposed he did. Only damn fools like Kitty changed. The intelligent people of the world never forgot the world was a hell of a damn jungle.

"Java, Miss Warburton?"

"That would be pleasant, Otto."

She selected a table off by itself as he scurried to the counter. Around her the usual Greenwich Village hangovers were sipping their eye-opening coffee and making with the usual small talk. She reflected that the Village had changed, too. Now Anastasia's Place was just a memory, closed up by the cops. Most of the artists and writers you saw were just talkers. She wondered what had ever happened to the old crowd. Some of them had had real talent. Pascetti, for instance. He'd really known what to do with a block of marble. When he'd turned out a head for a client it had really been a head.

"Dreamin' about the past?"

She recalled herself instantly to the present. She studied the thin, smiling lips, the almost colorless blue eyes. "You look terrible, Otto. Are you still having those bad dreams?"

He sat down, highly agitated. "The Boss says I oughtta go see one of them head doctors. The Boss says if I keep on I'll be a real lush."

"I'd hate to see that happen, Otto. I've always liked you."

"Yeah?" The blue eyes glistened.

"You're a man who doesn't take any crap. You're a man

who's not afraid to fight for what he wants. Too damn many people are afraid to do that, Otto."

It warmed him. He remembered that her voice had always been nice like that. She'd not been like the others. She'd never laughed at a guy. Yeah, and she'd been quick with the tips, too! And the Boss had been happy when she'd been around. The Boss hadn't been howling like a bull all the time, that was for sure.

"Geez, Miss Warburton, you oughtta make up with the Boss."

She put sugar and cream into her coffee and stirred. She had a sudden intuition that this was the big day of her career.

"What would you do, Otto, if someone double-crossed you?"

His hand went quickly to the pocket of his sharp gray jacket. Then he laughed huskily. "You're the quick one, Miss Warburton."

"He double-crossed me, Otto."

"Geez, it was her birthday, Miss Warburton."

"He never gave me presents like that, yet he was supposed to be in love with me. According to the newspapers, Otto, we were to be married."

He sighed. "The Boss is a funny guy. He don't mean to hurt nobody. All he wants to do is make money. And that's funny too, ain't it? I bet the Boss could buy that damned railroad with his own dough. I bet the Boss wouldn't go hungry if he lived to be a thousand and never made another deal. But there he goes, tryin' to make money with somebody else's dough."

"Niles won't lend him the money now. I'm sorry about that. I've always liked the Boss, Otto, just as I've always liked you. But after all, when a person double-crosses you . . ."

"Hey, are you really sorry? Hey, would you like to talk to the Boss?"

"Next Saturday night, perhaps, after the show. I could drive over from the cottage."

"Hey, is that where you're goin' now? Hey, I could drive you out."

"Otto, you're always so sweet, so thoughtful."

He wished it was Jenson saying that. He'd have Jenson bare-bottom naked before Jenson could say another word.

"Geez," he sighed. "I sure missed you, Miss Warburton."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE MOON pushed through a thin bank of clouds to drench the night with silver. So brilliant was the glow that Elaine felt tempted to switch off the headlights of her purring Buick. She'd often done that when she'd lived in Arizona. There'd always been something restful about driving across a desert lit only by the moon and its myriads of stars. But the appearance of a car far up the road caused her to draw her hand back from the light switch. It would be her luck to run into someone or something on this, the night of nights. Taking the risk was a luxury she couldn't afford at the present time. Each thing, she thought, in its proper time, its proper place. She swerved her car to the outer lane and settled down to a comfortable, pleasant thirty. She had all the time in the world. And probably it was good strategy to keep Napoleon waiting. It was a device he himself always used when he could. The trick was always to seem indifferent. When the other fellow grew impatient then you'd won a small advantage. Of itself, such an advantage meant little. But the sum total of all the advantages you'd won could very often make the difference between winning or losing.

"I should have worn black net," she muttered as the other car whizzed behind her on the road. That would have been another advantage. Like most of the men she'd ever tumbled, he had a particular fondness for a soft, white feminine body stuffed into black net. Such a sight always filled him with enthusiasm. Enthusiasm was an advantage, too, just as impatience was. She had a notion she'd need every advantage she could win before the battle started. How quick the old pirate's mind was, how eloquent and persuasive he could be when the champagne was good and plentiful and a bauble of jewelry was glittering in his fat hand! He'd been good enough to make a fool of her once, hadn't he?

The thought irritated her. She'd never liked playing the role of fool, she never would. It was all right to be a fool when you had more money in the bank than you could ever use. Then it made no difference what you did or what you chose to believe. In a sense it could even be pleasant to be a fool every once in a while. But to have been one while she was still poor! To have wasted almost a year of her life, a year of the good old beauty

so many men seemed to admire! That had been reprehensible! There'd been other admirers. None of them had been as rich as Napoleon, but each could have afforded to keep her nicely supplied with servants and jewelry and cars and interesting furs. Had she had the intelligence she'd been born with she might now be the mistress of a mansion, the queen of a very substantial bank account. Instead? She looked at the tall trees lining the road on either side. How mysterious the trees looked in the moonlight, how pitch black it was under the trees. She shivered. If she'd not played the fool she might now be comfortably home in bed, with nothing more vexatious on her mind than getting a good eight hours of sleep.

"Let me remember that, too," she thought.

She swung off Shore Road into the secondary branch road which meandered in haphazard fashion in the general direction of Long Island Sound. She followed it into a dark woods where no moonlight shone. Now the black of night gathered like monsters about the beams of her headlights. She recalled with a start that it had been almost that black and eerie the night the lusting bastard had raped her down in Arizona. And now she wished she'd insisted that Otto come for her. It would have been a great inconvenience to Otto, but it would have been comforting to have him and his knife around. She supposed that was why Napoleon put up with Otto and his bad dreams and his absorption in rye. He'd made a lot of enemies, Napoleon. It was always possible even in civilized times in a civilized country, that someone would blow his top and come buling into the house with a gun to even up the score.

Come to think of it, hadn't some hothead down in Haiti once tried to take Napoleon apart inch by inch?

The thoughts went on, flowing through her mind at express train speed as thoughts will when the night is dark and an idle mind has nothing better to do than deal with nonsense. She found herself thinking of all sorts of places and people. San Francisco. Was it still a city of fog and cool summers? The desert of the Little Colorado River. Were the magnificent gorges still there, and did Joe still spend his vacations there looking for gold and high adventure? Joe and Paul, Roger and Mike and Sims. Great day in the morning but what a lot of men she'd bedded! "When they write my success story," she said aloud, "let no person say it was an easy climb." She marveled that her body had any energy left. Or was that something to marvel about?

Incredibly successful people were always energetic people.

Maybe she'd been born for the fast tempo of success, too?

"Heaven willing," she thought, "heaven willing."

Now the lights revealed stuff more substantial than dark. They picked out the solidity of square brick columns supporting the weight and beauty of an iron-barred fence half-buried in ivy. The pointed end of each bar glimmered in the moonlight and she wondered if the dogs would be loose. Ugh, what savage brutes they were! Any one of them could knock a man flat without half trying. If they were to come at you in a pack you'd be cut to ribbons before you'd more than had the time to scream out once. Was that why Napoleon had sent the invitation? Was it murder he had on his mind?

With bated breath she turned the car into the drive-off before the stout bronze gate. Then the gate swung open and there was plump, red-cheeked Paul grinning a welcome at her and reminding her that thoughts after midnight were wild, nonsensical thoughts indeed. He passed her into the grounds with a wave of his hand. The gravel drive led her to a rustic bridge over a tinkling stream, then slanted upward to top the rise of a small hill. And there just beyond the shimmering ornamental pool, half circled by the night of beeches, oaks and maples, was Endicott House. She halted the car and sucked in her breath. She had a sudden conviction that if she owned that house she'd be willing to die defending it against all trespassers. What a beautiful big house it was, with its massive timbers and fieldstone, its overhung second story, its picturesque dormer windows and its steeply peaked shingle roof! It was a manorial house if she'd ever seen a picture of one. To own it, to own every scrap of wood and stone in it . . .

She shied away from the completion of the thought. As the front door opened she started the car again, swinging it easily around the ornamental pool with its nude statue of Aphrodite. Expecting to see Jenson, she was somewhat startled when a light came on to reveal Wallace himself standing on the broad piazza.

The battle, she thought, had begun.

"Got your bag with you?" He opened the door and pushed his bald head inside the rear. "Hmmm. I was beginning to wonder if you'd make it. You can't ever tell about women. At the last minute they're apt to change their minds or do something equally as nonsensical."

"An invitation to Endicott House, Wallace, is something no lover of beauty will ever turn down." She slipped her hands

into his fleshy paw and stepped down to a marble step. She heard a cicada chirp and the flutter of great wings overhead. "An owl! An owl! Wallace, see the owl!"

"Damned birds," he stated, "make a hell of a racket." He shut the doors of the car and waved her up the steps. "Sometimes Otto shoots at them. He rarely hits anything, though. Otto's talent is with a knife." He paused, scratching the top of his bald head. "Not even a nightie? That's a hell of a thing. It makes a man feel he's licked before he's even begun."

She stepped into the house and glanced eagerly about the long, broad hall. There were the tapestries, the pigeon's-blood vases on the stands of exquisitely carved teakwood. The beauty of the place made her want to scream. The bastard, the dirty, dirty bastard! To build a girl up to such a letdown! To raise her hopes so high, then to dash them so low!

"Hating me?" he asked. "Howling for the Old Man's blood?"

"How did you know, Wallace? I wish I could read minds."

He wheezed soft laughter. "It's a good idea always to employ one's powers of observation. As a matter of fact, I read your body, not your mind. Your spine stiffened, your hands clenched, your head snapped up a good two inches. There. Now you're warned. You're trying to fight with a master and you'll lose because I'm too smart for you. Want a drink?"

"In the library? I've always liked your library. You can smell history lying sound asleep between all the book covers."

His brown eyebrows arched. "A very pretty thought. I didn't know you could think such."

"There's much about me you don't know, Wallace. As a matter of fact, I think I'll risk a scrap with you. Did I ever tell you I enjoyed fighting against big odds?"

He led her into the library. Not a sound came from any part of the house. She heard the soft hiss of the fire at the end of the shadowed room and the rustle of trees in a gentle night wind. She took off her wrap and draped it across a chair. She studied the crowded shelves reaching up to the ceiling, and the books strewn in columns and piles on the various tables, and even on the floor. There were books everywhere. Old books and new books, books with tattered dust jackets, books with warped and dog-eared covers. She sighed. "When do you have time to read?"

"I don't. I just browse when I have a spare minute or two. Actually, the library was collected by Maria. She was an inveterate reader. That always astonished me. She was, how shall

I say it, like a flame. You'd have thought a library was the last place she'd visit, or collect. Yet here she sat on the snowy evenings, filling her mind with all sorts of knowledge, all sorts of idiotic dreams. Too bad, isn't it? Now poor Maria is dead, and she never lived as she could have lived if she'd taken the time to do so."

She didn't like the sound of death here in this shadowed room. Half-expecting to see a ghost materialize she sat down on the Oriental throw-rug before the hissing fire. "I'm glad Maria read her books, though, if that's what she wanted to do. People should always do what they want to do."

He mixed her a Scotch-and-soda and handed her the tumbler. She sat very still as his hands went lightly through her hair to draw the bobby pins. She sipped the drink. He'd made it very strong, the way she liked her drinks to be. It was interesting, how he never forgot the small details like that.

"What do you want to do, Elaine? I mean, what do you really want to do with your life?"

She heard a chair scrape across the floor. He expelled his breath in a long sigh. As though there'd never been a quarrel, he drew her back against his fat-cushioned knees and very gently stroked her forehead, her temples. She remembered a detail about him that she should never have forgotten. He was a sybarite. A view, a touch, a taste, an aroma, gave him almost as much pleasure as the moment of release from sexual tension. She smiled, enjoying his hands and the warmth of the fire.

"I want to live very magnificently, Wallace. I want to live in a house like this. I want my rose gardens and my bright green lawns. I want servants like your Jenson, and jewels like Hannah. And strange though the word may be, I want grace. There, that's all I want."

"It's foolish," he said firmly. "I have all that, but there really isn't pleasure in them. The happiness must come from within. I'm not talking about the happiness of love."

"I know you're not."

He pushed her head forward and began to knead the skin of her neck between his firm fingers.

"Why do you know that?"

"You love the Southern Drawl, don't you? Yet you'll take a chance on losing her because, more than the Southern Drawl, you want a railroad you don't need, and money you can't possibly spend in the rest of the years you've got left."

"It would be a triumph, you see. This happens to be the big

leagues, Elaine. Take Niles. They don't come shrewder than that young fellow. It's considered a rare thing when you've managed to outsmart him. That would be amusing."

"It's a drug, Wallace, isn't it?"

"You might call it that, I suppose. I've always had to win things, don't ask me why. In the beginning, of course, it was because I was poor. But now . . . yes, I guess you'd call it a drug, an escape such as Otto finds in his rye."

Sudden knowledge came to her. "Wallace, that's why you tolerate his drinking! Of course! I've often wondered."

He said, softly, "I want that railroad, Elaine."

It was like an orchestra hitting the downbeat that counted.

She finished her drink, then rose sensuously and sauntered with a rolling gait to a chair where she could see him. She tucked a leg up under her and sat down. "What's the deal?"

"Deal?"

"Wallace, please spare me the words of love. I'll give you more credit than you deserve. You have a way with you. Damn it, when you're talking about a girl's beauty you can be positively eloquent. You make love with your voice, do you know that?"

"I would prefer not to make a deal. Deals always cost a man money. However, perhaps I can afford to be generous. After all, I did use you harshly, didn't I?"

"You almost died one night, Wallace. If Jenson hadn't been around . . ."

He wheezed amused laughter. He wagged a hand. He wriggled his mountainous body. "But why do you think Jenson was around?"

The flames intensified in the fireplace as another log caught. A crackle of wood distracted her momentarily. Then she chuckled. "That's too strong, Wallace. If you'd known I was around you'd not have been so careless."

He pushed his lips. "That was an error. I was naive enough to believe you were asleep. I don't make many errors, will you admit that?"

"You can't afford them, Wallace. They cost one hundred thousand dollars in cash."

"Oh, bosh!" He got to his feet and went back to the decanter of Scotch. He poured himself a generous drink. "Now, then, do you think you're that necessary to me?"

"It depends upon how much you want the railroad. It depends upon how much Mr. Niles wants Miss Peabody. *If* he

wants her. Wallace, and *if* he thinks she loves you, then obviously you'll not get the loan from him. Let me see, now. You had a sixty day option. Hmmm. How interesting. It's now a month since you made your blunder. I can afford to sit tight. Can you?"

"You—you—"

"No, Wallace. No name calling, if you please. Damn you, I played it fair. I could have had any number of others, but you were interested, I thought, and I played it straight. And what was my reward? You damn fool, you could have bought a phony marriage from me then for twenty-five thousand in cash. It would have been cheap, all things considered. But you had to be cheap."

"You're silly," he said gently. He went back to his chair. "You surely don't think I'd marry you in order to gain possession of a railroad, do you?"

She settled down on her chair again. "As I said, Wallace, it all depends upon a couple of *ifs*. In either case, though, I win. I get a thousand a week now. The publicity you were kind enough to pay for has made me a name. It seems that all the world still loves a lover. Before it's run its course I'll have a hundred thousand in any event. You see?"

He eyed her curiously. "You're clever, do you know? I suddenly find you a worthy adversary. Come, let me give you a real drink. By God, now, I should've met you forty years ago."

"God forbid, Wallace. How hellish it must be to be sixty-five!"

"I might consider fifty thousand if you actually went through a marriage ceremony. You would naturally waive all rights to my estate for that figure. It would be mutually agreed that in the dreadful event of a divorce there'd be none of that nonsense about alimony and the like."

"You're a damn fool, Wallace. Why don't you take up that option with your own money?"

"For the very excellent reason that I don't have five million dollars."

She stared.

"This sort of life is expensive, you see. Oh, I'll never want for a hundred thousand. But why should I risk my own capital when Niles will lend it to me."

"It can't be much of a risk if he'll lend it to you."

He brushed that aside. "We were discussing a deal, I think."

She had to hold herself in check on the chair. She was afraid

that if she so much as thought beyond the moment she'd bring the dream to an end.

"I don't know, Wallace. There's not much left of fifty thousand after you've paid the taxes. What would it net me?"

"I might consider paying the taxes."

"I'd receive my fee just when?"

"When I got the loan from Niles."

"No."

"Damn it . . ."

"In advance, Wallace. I'm sure you can arrange it so that the moment we're married I can claim the money rightfully due me."

"For fifty?"

"And a year, Wallace. Isn't that fair? A year in which to prove to you I'm the wife you want."

Again he stared.

She smiled wryly. "You see, Wallace? You never thought of that, did you? You blind fool, why do you suppose I let the others go on to other girls? Do you think a girl not in love could tolerate you for five minutes?"

"I'll be damned!" breathed Wallace Endicott.

She took a savage step toward him. "Two of a kind, you idiot. Birds of a feather in the roaring jungle. Is that so fantastic?"

He studied the voluptuous body.

He recalled that when she was properly inspired she could dance most agreeably.

"Dance," he whispered.

"Without music, Wallace?"

He rushed to the radio and turned it on. Then with brooding rapture he sat as her shoes were discarded and her bare feet slapped the floor.

He swallowed a lump down in his throat.

Maria, he thought, *Maria.*

He got shakily to his feet and cornered her near the fireplace. "You damned vixen, why did you have to eavesdrop?"

"I—"

The telephone rang, startling her. She looked at the clock on the mantel. Three o'clock, she thought dazedly, on the greatest morning of her life!

"It might be important," he muttered.

"Wallace Endicott," she snapped, "you come right here to me."

But he had a better idea. He raised her tenderly in his arms

and carried her out to the terrace. "See the moon?" he rumbled.

"The servants, you dope, the servants!"

She decided the servants didn't matter. After all, servants were little people. And only big people counted, big people like Wallace and herself.

"The roses," she sighed, "were beautiful . . ."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"ALL YOU gotta do, lovey-duck, is try."

Ted Underwood scowled. He looked around the garish room and shivered as a cockroach ran up the wall. He wondered where he was, and what he was doing in bed with a blonde. He didn't like blondes. There was no color in blondes. Besides they were cold, ice cold. To them it was just something you did to make a man happy. And in turn, it was a way of getting something they wanted.

He sat up and pressed his hands to his aching temples. He wondered if a truck had hit him. There was too much careless driving these days. "Where am I?"

"Mrs. Plunkett would be sore if she heard you ask that. This is a really classy joint, lovey-duck. It ain't everyone which is allowed to come in. We got standards."

Now a second cockroach ran up the wall after the first. They met up high near the ceiling, wiggling around as though they didn't know whether to love or to fight.

"Who the hell is Mrs. Plunkett?"

"She's awful nice," smiled the blonde. She sat up and kissed his cheek. "Mrs. Plunkett's like a real mother to us girls. Look, can I ask you somethin'?"

"What?"

"Who's this Elaine you keep talkin' about. Is she hundred-dollar stuff? The way you talk about her—"

"She's a bitch," said Ted Underwood savagely. "She's a no-good whoring bitch who's going to die."

Blue eyes rounded. "Hey, that's no way to talk. You wanna get cooped up or somethin'?"

He got out of bed. The room started to spin around and around and he wondered if he'd make it to the window. Air, that was what he needed, lots of fresh air.

"No, you don't!" whooped the blonde.

Before he knew what had happened he was on the floor and she was sitting on his stomach as though he were a horse. "Look, will you get off me?"

"You dirty snooping flatfoot. And all the time I was feeling sorry for you! I was tryin' to help you forget!"

"You're crazy!" roared Ted.

But the girl began to scream and presently all sorts of peo-

ple came running into the room, led by a huge Negro who looked as though he could knock an elephant flat with one punch.

"A flatfoot," wheezed the blonde. "Joe, the bastard was tryin' to signal his sidekicks outside."

"Air," moaned Ted. "Damn it, I want air!"

"You jus' come wif me, honey-chile."

With an almost insulting ease the huge Negro plucked him from the floor. He found himself being pushed out into the hall, while various girls made caustic comments about his anatomy and ancestry. The Negro didn't bother about the stairs.

He just lifted him high and ran down the two flights with him to the office just off the very dignified and respectable living room. A door was kicked open by the Negro's foot and he found himself looking at a dumpy, apple-cheeked woman seated behind a small, glass-topped desk. "My word," the woman exclaimed. "Joe, do you wish to shock me?"

"I'm going to kill someone," said Ted Underwood savagely. He focused his eyes on the woman's face. "You'll wish you'd never been born." He had to close his mouth at that point. In another minute, he thought, he'd vomit.

Bustling with self-importance the blonde slut came into the office. She'd put on a sleazy red wrapper and looked like a hangover personified. "He tried to signal a sidekick from the windows, Mrs. Plunkett. Geez, why the hell do they hate us?"

"I'm afraid, Helene, you've made a little mistake."

Ted felt the Negro relax his grip. He lunged. As the Negro let go completely, his impetus carried him forward and he cracked his knees on the desk.

"Mr. Underwood is known to me, Helene. Your picture was in this evening's paper, Mr. Underwood."

It began to come back. An inch at a time, a word at a time, he remembered what it was he'd been trying to forget. It had something to do with Elaine. Something to do with Elaine marrying a murderer, a wife-murderer.

"Helene, Mr. Underwood is the manager of the singer who is to marry Mr. Endicott after all."

The blonde's mouth fell slack. "Cripes!"

Mrs. Plunkett sighed. "Would you care to beat Helene, Mr. Underwood? I could supply you with a belt. Now really, Helene, this was very foolish of you."

2

A light rain was falling when he let himself from the brownstone front in crooked Cherry Lane. It was really less a rain

than a mist, and it let up before he'd walked more than a hundred feet. He was sorry about that. He liked the rain on his cheeks, just as he liked a blowing wind through his hair. Or was it Elaine who liked the wind in her hair? He snorted. Little things like that were important. Sometimes remembering them made all the difference between pleasing and displeasing her. And he had to please her always, didn't he? He was her manager. Some day they'd be married. A husband who forgot the little things . . .

He halted, watching three Kittys come out of the bar on the corner. He wondered why she was hitting the bottle. It was stupid of a dancer to hit the bottle. Nothing took the spring from your muscles more quickly than alcohol. And without that important spring a girl might just as well stop trying to be a dancer. It was the same with a singer's voice. Get the old alcohol huskiness into your pipes and you were washed up. He'd have to remember to tell Elaine that soon. Lately she'd been drinking too much.

He wondered why he was the only guy who ever stayed sober.

"No doubt," he told himself, "because I haven't got talent. All I've got is a brain. Fuzz up the old brain and I'm washed up, too."

"Kitty," he called, waking the echoes. "Kitty, what the hell are you doing out in the cold?"

And now a very amazing thing occurred. In the act of turning around under the street lamp the three bodies of Kitty Forbes became six spry and shapely bodies. "I'll book 'em all," he thundered. "I'll squeeze every damned body into the act."

Kitty Forbes gulped. The poor bastard, she thought, the poor, heartbroken bastard.

"Hi, Ted."

"Hi, Kitty, want a drink?"

"I've been looking all over for you, Ted."

"Funny, drinks always do that. You mustn't drink so much, you know. The spring is very important. When you lose the spring you might as well give up. There, I'm giving it to you straight."

"Sure, you big lunkhead."

Sighing, Kitty put her arms around him and helped him to the cab on the corner. The driver looked somewhat pained, but the bright color of green stirred his chivalrous instincts.

"Sure, lady," he grunted. "You pour it in and I'll pour it home."

"Sir," demanded Ted Underwood, "are you implying I'm souzled?"

"Horrors," boomed the cabbie.

"Or would you like a good bust on the nose?"

"Ted, Elaine's waiting."

It stirred an animal instinct. Deep within him something responded. "She is?"

"Sure, Ted, sure. At my place. Look, she wants to tell you all about it. There, isn't seeing Elaine a lot better than getting drunk?"

"I'm drunk?"

It offended him. He turned from the cab, but something hard banged his shin. He yiped and fell forward, and by a peculiar coincidence happened to land on the floor of the cab.

The cabbie contemplated Kitty's shoe with open-mouthed admiration. "A very tidy trick, sister, a very tidy trick indeed."

Without further ado, Ted was taken to Kitty's apartment. The driver got him into the vestibule, and Carter Nickson carried the body upstairs. Presently Ted found himself lying on the floor of a shower stall. The water hammered at him like driven nails. They beat into his flesh, cutting to the raw, filling him with cold, shocking his nerves. But gradually the room stopped spinning around and around. If he wasn't entirely sober when Carter let him out, he was at least sober enough to know what Carter had done to him.

"Wait till you get a snootful."

"Coffee?" chirped Kitty's voice.

Carter draped a robe around the wet body. "A gallon ought to do it."

"Why?"

Ted sat down on the closed seat of the toilet. He inhaled the fragrance of coffee and took the cup with a shaking hand. The liquid felt scalding in his mouth, but it had the effect of thawing out one of his frozen ribs.

"Damn it, what the hell's going on around here?"

Carter Nickson lounged against the wall. "Look, fellow, there's business to be done."

"I stand on my constitutional rights to get soused whenever I feel like it."

He got up and went out to the living room. He parked himself on the couch and squinted through the bright light. "I thought you said Elaine was here."

"Balke's offered me a new contract, Ted." Carter Nickson went over to a chair and sat himself down. "It's a pretty good

deal. Now that Elaine's quitting the show, he'll pull television in. He wants to build his T.V. shows around production numbers. That means he wants an exclusive on my music. That means . . ."

"That's right," said Ted. "She's going to leave the show, isn't she?"

It made Kitty's heart twist inside her. It hit her suddenly that this had been a real love, not one of those convenient loves so many men found for a girl if the girl's curves properly filled her scanties. A mist formed before her eyes.

"Look, you big lug, she's not the only girl in the world."

"For me she is."

"Ted, if I told you all I could about Elaine you wouldn't come within a hundred feet of her. Ted, she used to be an awful drug addict. Yes, and a thief, too, Ted. You damn fool, how do you suppose she lived? The good old roll-the-drunk game. That's where she got the money for us to come to New York."

"She's like Aphrodite in the moonlight, Elaine."

"Always quick with the fadeout, Ted, when something big comes along."

"In an apron she looks even better. In an apron she's the most beautiful tomato alive."

"And to hell with anyone who gets in her way. That's Elaine, too. Ted, even if she'd marry you, she wouldn't have made you happy. She can't, Ted, she can't!"

He shuddered. His hazel eyes grew enormous. "She'll die, Kitty. Do you know that? She'll die."

She shivered, too. She wondered why the night had suddenly turned so cold.

"Why will she die, Ted?"

He shook himself from his thoughts. He thought of the love he'd had for her, and what she'd done to that love. He laughed hoarsely. "But it doesn't matter. Do you see? It doesn't matter a damn."

3

Kitty dreamed a dream.

It wasn't often she did that. Unlike Elaine, she spent hours each day exercising, practicing her steps. That always left her exhausted by the time her day had come to an end around four o'clock in the morning. When she settled down for the night she slept. The sleep was sound and deep. Her nerves never reacted to the street noises, her ears never even heard them. And her mind, being tired, was invariably too tired to dream.

Still, that mid-September night, with Carter snoring in the living room and Ted sawing wood in the bedroom Elaine had wanted to occupy, Kitty dreamed a dream.

She dreamed she was out on Long Island, sitting on a bench overlooking the ornamental pool before Wallace Endicott's huge house of fieldstone and heavy timber. And there the statue of Aphrodite was swimming around in the pool, singing, laughing, having a devil of a time while the moon giggled and all the stars laughed.

Then a shadow fell across the festive scene, an immense shadow that turned out to be Wallace Endicott wearing his old-fashioned pleated box cape. And in his hand was a cane. And as the Aphrodite swam over to say hello to him, he brought the cane down on the Aphrodite's buttocks and began to beat her to death. Then the moon began to weep and all the stars began to scream, and as the Aphrodite sank dead to the bottom of the pool Kitty Forbes woke up.

She shivered with terror in the cold dark. She knew it was insanity, yet when she turned on the light she fully expected to see Wallace Endicott standing over the bed, his cane red with a statue's blood. She whimpered. She looked around the room and finally found the courage to climb from her bed and rush out to the couch where Carter lay sleeping. The first touch of her hand woke him up.

"What the devil?"

"Carter, I'm afraid. I've just had an awful dream. Carter, I'm afraid of Wallace Endicott."

He sat up and drew her down to his lap. "You crazy fool," he whispered. "Get back to bed."

"Carter, his first wife died in Haiti. Ted told me that once. But how did she die, Carter? Do you think he beat her to death with his cane?"

A siren wailed in the night. One would have thought it was the wail of a banshee, the way she started and clung to him.

He worked spit down into his parched throat. "Now listen, I'm just human. Damn it, I order you to get back to bed."

"Carter, there's something wrong, something dreadfully and horribly wrong."

Her voice made him uneasy. She wasn't the sort who went off half-cocked. And this was genuine fear. Her skin felt mountain-stream cold, the shivers were genuine.

"Ted and his wild talk." He carried her back into her bedroom. The silken softness of her body drew his fingers back to her skin. It gave him extraordinary pleasure just to have her in

his arms. He wanted a lifetime of that pleasure, and he wanted her to come to him always when she'd had a nightmare.

"I love you, Kitty."

"I know, Carter, I know."

"I think it's time we married. I won't ever be an Endicott, but I'll certainly never half frighten you to death."

She kissed his chin, his nose. Then the lights struck her as being unnecessary. Now that Carter was with her, there was no reason to feel afraid.

Her white hand moved to the chain.

There was darkness, warm, fragrant, utterly beautiful darkness and she forgot the horror of her dream, the madness of her dream.

"With all my heart," said Carter Nickson, "I love you."

"I've got love," thought Kitty. "I've got love!"

The wonder and sweetness of it made her cry.

CHAPTER NINE

GREEN EYES sparkling, Elaine rode in from her ride at a full gallop. She made a fine sight on the spirited palomino; she seemed like a half frisky animal herself as she sprang down to the grass and rushed with a whoop of sheer joy straight to Hannah King's widespread arms.

"Welcome, you old goat, to Endicott House!"

Looking at the girl, Sarah Peabody suddenly understood why it was that Wallace had decided to marry her after all. In the bright morning she was life itself, gay, tempestuous, full of strange notions and whims, but always living, always radiating a happiness that was infectious, to say the least. Sarah Peabody frowned, made to feel dull and tired, as she never liked to feel. But as Elaine turned to her she found a smile for the girl.

"Oh, your Hannah and I have already met. In fact, we've had a long chat about you. She tells me you don't want a fancy church wedding. But why not? My dear child, you'll be ravishing in satin and lace!"

"Wallace doesn't want it, either. We had a long pow-wow last night and we've decided a home wedding will suit us nicely."

"Men are always like that." Sarah Peabody closed her book and rose from the lawn chair with a sigh. "Women are supposed to be different, my dear. They're supposed to be more practical."

"Oh?"

"The Leroys, for example, would greatly enjoy a formal wedding. Incidentally, the Leroys have a very fine gift for you. You see? The one gets the other."

The redhead hesitated, then laughed lightly. "Hannah, you had better go inside. Tell Jenson who you are and what your duties are to be. Incidentally, she'll still run Endicott House. You'll be my personal maid, won't you like that? When there's nothing for you to do then you may play chess or checkers or something with Otto."

"Yes, Mum." With uncommon meekness Hannah promptly swung about and maneuvered her way into Endicott House, a bulging satchel clutched in each redoubtable hand.

"She certainly looks competent enough. Wallace tells me she's been with you for a long time."

"Almost two years. Look, shall I be frank, Sarah? I found her weeping in her gin one night in a honkytonk where I worked. She needed a home, I thought I needed a maid. So she came to work for me just for room and board."

Wrinkles marred the symmetry of Sarah Peabody's brow. She wondered what Wallace had let himself in for. She wished she'd not scolded him because of his treatment of Elaine. She wished she'd seen him more often since the day of that scolding.

"Why should that trouble me?" she asked pleasantly. "As a matter of fact, why should that trouble anyone? Elaine, I'm afraid you've acquired several wrong ideas. Oh, I don't for an instant deny that some wealthy persons will refuse to accept you. But most will. People are people, my dear, whether they're rich or poor."

"You hate me, don't you?"

Sarah looked across the lawn at the distant copper beeches. It seemed odd to sit there and plan the girl's wedding. Not so very long ago she'd sat on the same spot and planned the changes she would make when she became mistress of Endicott House. A pang pinched her heart. She blinked her eyes furiously.

"Isn't that a silly thing to say? Why should I hate you? Wallace has the right to marry whomever he pleases."

"But you do. You're a lady about it, but I can tell. I won't say that I'm sorry. But I'll say this. You're a good sport."

"Let that be my epitaph," Sarah thought wildly. She felt abashed before the girl's admiring green eyes. "I simply hope, Elaine, that you'll make him happy."

"He'll be happy, the old scoundrel."

And it seemed to Sarah that there was genuine affection in the girl's voice. It seemed to Sarah that the girl's eyes brightened as Wallace in white ducks and a colorful sport shirt came out of the house.

She got to her feet and looked at her watch.

"But now you'll have to excuse me. Wallace, we've decided there'll be a church wedding after all. It's the only sensible thing. The only fair thing, it seems to me. After all, this will be Elaine's last experience at matrimony. Really, I won't let you cheat her of the thrill of a big, splashy wedding."

He scratched his bald head. "Well, now, I don't know." The brown eyes went querulously to Elaine's sober face. "You sure you want that? It's an awful lot of fuss."

"I think I do want it, Wallace." She studied Sarah's set face, and hammered another nail into the coffin containing Sarah's hopes. "I want everyone to know that I've married you—everyone."

He slapped his hands to his thighs. "So be it." He smiled wanly at Sarah. "You want to handle all the fuss, or should I have the Leroys do it?"

"Wallace, just you dare try to cut me out of it!"

Her face very pink, Sarah rushed across the drive to her yellow roadster. She gunned the car toward the gate, leaving them half enveloped in dust and carbon monoxide smoke and fumes.

"Definite wench, isn't she?"

"I'd better leave, too, Wallace. I've all sorts of appointments in New York."

He rumbled abrupt laughter. "You loved rubbing it in, didn't you?"

"What's the fun of winning, darling, if you can't gloat."

Again came the snort of laughter. "Niles telephoned a few minutes ago to congratulate me. The hard-hearted bastard says he's inclined to make the loan as a wedding gift. I told him I expected the loan *and* a fine oil painting. He'd have given me the loan long ago if Sarah hadn't been involved. I guess she'll marry him, now."

It halted her in midstride. She wondered what manner of man he was to talk about it so cold-bloodedly. "It does nothing to you, Wallace, nothing at all?"

His eyes silenced her. They told her it was doing everything to him.

Frowning, she got into her Buick. At a very sedate pace she drove out through the gate and headed back to the cottage on the Great Neck shore of Manhasset Bay. It rather startled her to find Kitty waiting for her on the little private beach. There'd been no word from Kitty since the published announcement of last week. There'd been no word from any of them, come to think of it. That amused her. Good old envy. You could always count on it to rear its ugly head the instant you'd gone another rung up the ladder.

"Hi, Scamp."

"Hi, Scanties."

"Long time no see."

"Carter and I have been busy. We're being married."

"Kitty!"

She began to take the girl into her arms, but found that the

figure had suddenly become wooden. She found a barely concealed loathing in the blue eyes.

"At any rate, congratulations."

She turned and went thoughtfully to the beach. Now that the sun was strong she felt stickily uncomfortable in her riding-clothes. Wherever she glanced she saw an Indian Summer haze steaming from the land, the water. She had a suspicion that the city would be like an oven and she decided not to travel in to the city. Lord knew there was enough work waiting for her in the house.

"What do you want, Kitty? Apparently, not my congratulations and good wishes?"

The girl came across the sand, her feet sinking deep. With a little puff of annoyance she finally sat down and looked at the gold surface of the water.

"I hate to see you do it, Elaine. I suppose that's why I'm here. It's funny. Friendship, I mean. Last week I found poor Ted roaring drunk in Cherry Lane and I hated you because you'd done that to him. And then it all came back to my mind. Elaine, we've been through a lot, haven't we?"

Elaine looked back through the years. There's almost been seven she thought. Horrible years, some of them, lean and hungry years. One Christmas they'd almost frozen to death in a boxcar parked on a siding in Colorado.

Another Christmas they'd rolled a drunk and had had the time of their lives.

"It's been a long, rough haul."

"And now here we are. There's a part of the Atlantic Ocean. We've seen all the country, haven't we? Do you remember the first time we tasted the coffee down in Louisiana, the way we spit it out? Chicory! Funny, I still taste it in my mouth."

The voice receded while Kitty swam in the mists of nostalgia, while Kitty forgot that reality, the moment, was all that counted on earth and ever would count.

"I keep remembering the poverty, Kitty. I'm sorry. I'd like to forget. I'd like to marry Ted and make him happy. But I keep remembering the pain and horror of it."

"I wouldn't mind scrubbing floors for Carter."

"Then it's all right for you. My fingers would feel insulted if they were asked to scrub floors for anyone."

"It's the love that counts."

Descent into the maelstrom of mawkishness, thought Elaine. She wondered why all roads led to it. Why couldn't good friends

just shake one another's hand and wish one another luck and be done with the business?

"Kitty, I'll miss you."

It pained Kitty Forbes. "You don't have to do it, you know. I mean, you're making enough. With Ted's help you'll make more."

"Next year, I think, we'll go on a world cruise. It'll be fun. I've always had a yen to see the world, remember?"

"Ted's drinking, Elaine."

"I know."

"He deserves better than that."

"I know."

"And you love him."

"I know."

"Can't you say anything but that?"

Elaine looked pensively at the sea. She saw a gull coming toward the land with lazy strokes of its wings. Then the wing of a barnyard skate cleaved the water momentarily, as though anxious to impress upon her the fact she would miss the cottage and the pleasant life she'd enjoyed by the sea that summer. Ted, she reflected, had been part of that good life, too. She remembered that one day they had walked miles upon miles along the shore to Hewlett Point.

They'd ended up in a seafood restaurant eating filet of sole and drinking beer. There'd been nothing sensational about the date. In fact, when she'd finally trudged into the cottage her feet had been sore and every muscle of her legs and thighs had protested the hard usage bitterly. Yet it had been one of the pleasantest days of her life. For a little while she'd been just a girl with her boy in the great outdoors, with only fun on her mind, and happiness in her heart.

Yes, she'd miss Ted, too. In a sense, she'd probably miss him for the rest of her life. They'd had some good moments.

"What else is there to say?" she asked, meeting question with question as she almost always did when she couldn't answer directly. "Kitty, stop to think for just a moment, will you? I've been very lucky. I happened to meet a man who has an obsession for making money. He happens to have a great need of me. So it happens that I can make what used to seem a ridiculous dream come true. And please don't tell me you'd turn Endicott down if you were in my position. You wouldn't. Nor would any intelligent girl who knew the value of money."

"At least see him, Elaine. Damn it, you just can't drop people like that. He was good to you, damned good to you!"

A certainty gathered at the back of her mind. She frowned, disgusted with herself. She should have guessed the truth sooner. Kitty was too early to have taken a train out to this corner of Long Island. She'd been driven. And by Ted, naturally. She got up angrily.

"A fine friend you are! Damn it, I don't want scenes. I never told him I'd marry him. If he's hurt, it's his own fault. These men a girl meets! It's perfectly all right for them to play fast and loose, to love you and leave you. But when a girl does the same thing to them then suddenly she's a monster! Look, I notice you never worried about me when I'd been brushed off."

"Because you didn't love. Ted does. There's a difference."

Kitty stood up and brushed sand from her dull green skirt. She turned and went back to the cottage. She disappeared behind the building, and presently Elaine heard a car door slam shut. Her satisfaction with the day and her life vanished. She looked toward the rocks on the left where one night he'd had his moonkissed Aphrodite.

She gritted her teeth as he came slowly over the sand. She saw that his face was ashen and his eyes were puffy, bloodshot. She tried to imagine Wallace or Arthur drinking that way because he'd lost his girl. But she couldn't conjure up such a picture. The difference was that they had strength and that poor, handsome, clever Ted just didn't.

"You're behaving like a fool, Ted," she said sharply. "You make me feel ashamed."

"Balke tells me you've broken the contract. Isn't it astonishing how things make sense if you're only patient enough to wait for your answer?"

"The television people wouldn't have accepted that sort of contract. That was why I wouldn't agree to television."

He sat down on the sand. "That was my trouble all along, wasn't it? There were so many indications, but I refused to look at them. I was a kid whistling in the dark, wasn't I? All the time your mind was scheming on, wasn't it?"

"I have to be rich," she said doggedly. "I don't care what you or anyone else thinks, I have to be rich."

He laughed hollowly. He had a secret, did Ted Underwood. He wondered if now was the time to tell her about it.

"Wallace will make me rich, Ted. So it has to be this way. I get fifty thousand the day we're married. The money is already in the bank under the name of Mrs. Wallace Endicott. It isn't a joint account. You see?"

The anger came back into his mind. He thought of the fun

they'd had right here on this beach. He thought of the admission she'd made in the bedroom not so very long ago.

"You damn fool, can't you even see what you're doing to yourself? He'll break you. You don't win when you battle that guy. Listen, he came up from the gutter, too. But he didn't have a pretty face or a pretty shape or a voice that could be parlayed into a good income. Yet now he's got more dough than you'll ever have. Doesn't that tell you anything?"

It would go on and on, she thought moodily. There'd be curses, there'd be tears. Words by the hundred would come spilling past her lips. But they would all add up to what?

"Ted," she said sharply, "you were just another man. You were strong and energetic and I found you agreeable. If I had it to do all over again I'd still hop into your bed. But will you please get it into that thick skull of yours that I love no one but myself?"

"Suppose," he said dreamily, "that you discovered you'd married a murderer. Would you want your Ted then?"

It exasperated her. She jumped to her feet and went back to the cottage with quick, vigorous strides. She rounded the rear of the cottage and met Kitty's questioning eyes.

"Will you please take the damn fool away, Kitty?"

Blonde Kitty sighed. "No dice?"

"You shouldn't have brought him out here. I don't care a damn what he does, or what happens to him. I never have, I never will. They come, they go, remember?"

"You love me," said Ted stubbornly. "You'll always love me."

"Good-bye, Ted."

"Listen . . ."

"I'm sorry, Ted. I can hear only the jingling of money. It was so nice knowing you, really it was."

"Damn you," he roared, "you *will* listen to me."

As it happened, however, she didn't. She went back into the cottage and bolted the doors against him. In the living room she poured herself a stiff drink and gulped it down straight. After that the morning grew pleasant again.

"I'm rich." Elaine breathed in the middle of the room. "Great day in the morning, I'm rich."

As his car backed out into the road she poured herself another drink. The dream, the dream. By God, she caught up with the dream!

CHAPTER TEN

FOR SARAH PEABODY it took on the quality of a nightmare. It had been very pleasant to be called a good sport, but in the days which followed she found little solace in the compliment. An emptiness came into her heart and remained there. It was bad enough before the magnificent church wedding when she had all sorts of tasks with which to distract her mind. But after the bridal couple had left for a honeymoon in Montreal, the emptiness grew worse and worse. Suddenly she hated Long Island with its cold, bleak October. But when she went back to her ancestral home on the James River of Virginia she found that life there was just as hateful. None of her friends were quite bold enough to say it frankly, but at the back of their eyes she could see the thought that once again Sarah Peabody had been left at the post. That infuriated her. She wanted to scream, to smash things. She wanted to tell everyone that the fault had been Wallace's, not hers.

Yet gnawing away at the back of her mind was the suspicion that she had no one to blame but herself. The trouble was that she'd not really made up her mind until it had been too late. If she'd just been able to choose in time, *she'd* be in Montreal with Wallace now, and *she'd* be Mrs. Endicott, the queen of Endicott House.

Jimmy hadn't been the only person in the world with five million dollars to invest in a good thing. Right there in Virginia she could have found the money Wallace had needed. After all, a five per cent return on an investment was a darned nice return. She could have had the money for Wallace two weeks after she'd learned of his need. And then . . . ?

"Grammy," she whimpered on the rolling lawn. "I've been a consummate idiot."

"Have you, child?" Mrs. Peabody looked up from her embroidery. Before her lay the placid James River and over the water weeping willows hung prettily, their long, tenuous branches swinging in the sunset wind. "I wouldn't take it too seriously, if I were you. It seems that the women of our family have always been consummate idiots. You have simply kept the tradition alive, that's all."

"Grammy, I'm not eighty-nine. I can't be that philosophical

about my losses. I want to knock Elaine Warburton flat and stomp on her, and make Wallace wish he'd never been born."

"Ashton would be my idea of a perfect husband for you. He's a man of simple dignity and charm. He'd give you a very happy life. I must confess I never approved of Wallace Endicott. The man has always reminded me of a summer storm. Before you know what is happening he's raging all around you. I may be old-fashioned, but I think it would be trying to live with a summer storm the rest of my life. Ashton."

Sarah clenched her hands. With commendable restraint, however, she held back all the thoughts she had on the subject of Ashton Valiant.

"He's a man obsessed by an idea, Grammy. Wallace, I mean. And that was my misfortune. I was frightened by him and by the idea. Elaine Warburton wasn't. So while I was trying to choose between Wallace and Jimmy she stepped in and now I've no choice left."

The sun dropped lower in the west. Now the river grew ruddy with good cheer, and a purple mist began to fill the hollows of the valley. Mrs. Peabody grew aware of the chill and gathered her things together and placed them in her work basket. A diminutive creature with birdlike hands and feet she turned spryly on the browning lawn and walked up the flagstone path toward the white frame Colonial house. Five generations of Peabodys had lived and died in that house, and it had been the elderly lady's hope that she would see the squalling sixth generation upstairs in the nursery before she had gone to join her forbears in the little family cemetery at the far end of the grounds. The progeny of a Peabody and a Valiant, she thought wistfully, would be quite a pumpkin. A man child! She trembled. The trouble with the house was that it had been dominated by women too long. Perhaps, that was why the house was beginning to look old well before its time.

There was nothing like a lusty man child around to keep a house and everyone who lived in it young.

"You have the same choice," she told her mournful granddaughter, "that anyone has. I think it's time you heard a few plain truths. The Wallace Endicotts of this world are very exciting. They trample the laws, they bend life to their wills. As I said before, they're like summer storms with all their sounds and furores. But like summer storms, they peter out abruptly. And that happens to be why a sensible girl marries someone who has more body to him. Someone like Ashton . . . or Mr. James Niles."

"Grammy, Jimmy's a walking icicle! There's no fun in Jimmy at all!"

"Does life always have to be fun?"

But now they'd reached the house, and there was fat, smiling, colored Bertha to take Grammy upstairs in the elevator for her little nap before dinner. Usually Bertha was a very considerate servant. She almost never interfered and was customarily the most unobtrusive creature Sarah had ever seen. But when the welfare of Grammy was involved Bertha could be the wildest, clawingest tigress alive. Bertha studied Grammy's wrinkled face when Bertha exploded.

"Ain' you got the sense you was born wif? Wants to catch your death of cold and Miss Sarah not married yet? Now don't give me none o' your sass, Miz Rachel. Just you come upstairs to the fire where you belongs."

"Bertha, it was so lovely out at the river. Goodness, the different birds I saw. Bertha, the autumn migration is underway."

"Now ain't that just wonderful?" Her strong arm around the tiny waist. Bertha helped Mrs. Peabody into the little elevator. Then Bertha beetled her brows in the way she always did when she was trying to remember something. A door opening at the rear end of the hall gave Bertha's mind a big assist. "You gots company, Miss Sarah. You gots company in the library."

Leather heels cracked on the oak floor. Sarah, turning, found that she now had company in the hall. She sighed. She waited until the elevator had whined upstairs, then smiled at Jimmy.

"No doubt you have a business investment to take care of here in Virginia."

"No doubt."

He looked weary and gaunt in the purple evening shadows that were beginning to fill the hall. She could imagine a great many women falling in love with him. His tailored blue suit fit him beautifully, and the streak of white in his coal black hair gave him a dashing if distinguished appearance.

She found it ironical that he loved her just as hopelessly as she loved uninhibited Wallace. They'd both been made for love, she thought; their tragedy was that they'd fallen in love with the wrong people.

"Want a drink?"

He shook his well-modeled head quickly. "I'm to discuss business in Richmond early in the morning. I find that alcohol always interferes with my sleep."

It had a stuffy sound to it. The words galled. "You might be a happier person if you'd just let go once in a while, Jimmy. You might be a great deal of fun."

He scowled at her as she poured herself a jigger of Old Smuggler. "Is is necessary to become drunk in order to prove that one has a fun-loving heart?"

Stuffier and stuffier! The trouble was that he'd been an old man the day he'd been born. The training his family had given him hadn't made him younger. She thought that was odd and began to think that people who were born poor were the lucky ones. Great wealth, it seemed, stultified. It had repressed Jimmy, it had repressed her. And while they were looking around for life, life was passing them by.

"Wallace Endicott manages to combine fun with business. I don't see what prevents you from doing so."

His scowl deepened. He went to the chair before the uncurtained picture window. It afforded a magnificent view of the grounds and the river. Stirred as always by the sight of old trees standing with majesty against the backdrop of the sunset sky, he heaved a long, heartfelt sigh. "Is that what you want, Sarah? I often wonder. It would seem to me that life with Endicott would be trying. You certainly could never count on security. The roads of most promoters lead, in the end, to poverty. I should think you would want to cling to what you have here."

She had an immediate vision of life with Wallace Endicott. She saw Wallace and herself roaming the country, becoming involved in all kinds of intricate, exciting business deals. Between successes they would make love violently.

"But Wallace is married," she answered obliquely. "By the way, I read that you'd granted him the loan. That was nice of you, Jimmy. You've never liked him, yet you've helped him to complete the biggest deal of his life."

Color stained the smooth cheeks of James Niles. The truth was that Endicott had outsmarted him. Somehow, in some way, Endicott had managed to get an option on the damned Fraser Railroad for practically a song. After he'd accomplished that, Endicott had been in the driver's seat. Thanks to the defense effort the factories of New England were working twenty-four hours a day again. The Fraser Railroad had suddenly begun to loom large in the railroad scheme of things. Right now, if he wanted to, Endicott could turn around and sell the railroad at a profit. Another year from now . . .

"I had no choice, actually," he lamented. "If I hadn't loaned

him the money someone else might have. It's a remarkably sound investment at the moment. Oh, of course it will drop in value if there's a depression. But a depression certainly doesn't seem imminent. And the bank has to put its capital somewhere, doesn't it?"

"Five per cent . . . that's pretty low, all things considered."

The sunset red deepened to magenta. Now the shadows grew thick in the room and it was difficult to see her face. Yet he had conviction it was a blushing face. He sighed, wondering why she resented him so. It could be, of course, that she actually loved Wallace, but he was inclined to doubt that. At the very worst it was merely the attraction of opposites. But that was because of her relative youth. She was too intelligent really to love the old scoundrel as deeply as she thought she did.

"I won't deny that I bought him off, Sarah. Why should I? Isn't there a saying to the effect that all is fair in love and war? In another age I'd have disposed of him with a club. Now in these civilized times I dispose of him with a loan that is good business for the bank as well as profitable to me. That is the value of money. A man would be a fool not to spend it for the things he wants."

And not so much as a tremor of passion in his voice. He might be discussing a load of wood he'd bought, or a mortgage he'd bought up.

"You make me sick," she cried, irritated. "You make me ashamed to be a woman. Is that all I do to you?"

"I love you deeply."

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"I would do my level best to make you happy."

"Three cheers and a tiger. Damn it, tell me about my lips. Don't they make you hunger to kiss and embrace me? And the way my hips undulate when I walk. Don't my hips stir the animal in you?"

James Niles had never been so scandalized in his life.

He came, startled, to his feet. "You're drunk."

"On one drink? Jimmy, my father practically weaned me on whiskey. I can drink five of these and still walk a straight chalk line."

He began to wish he'd not planed down to Virginia. He began to wish he'd never met Sarah Peabody. He didn't know her when she behaved like this. She was like a figment of a bad dream. At one and the same time she stirred and repelled him.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," he said warmly. "You talk like a guttersnipe."

"And yet," she said moodily, "I'd marry you if just once you'd look at me as though I were human."

She got up and turned on one of the fringed, old-fashioned lamps. In the golden light her cheeks were scarlet, her gray eyes remorseful. "Perhaps you'd better leave, Jimmy? It's over. You've won. Now Wallace is married and he'll never again be a rival. And probably I'll marry you one of these days. You're good. I know that. And you're what a Peabody should have. But don't say anything more now, please? Jimmy, perhaps Wallace was just an illusion. But now that he's gone . . ."

A gleam came into his vivid blue eyes. Then he surprised her. He stepped quickly across the patterned rug and took her into his arms. His muscles were like springs of coiled steel. They held her rigid in his embrace, and his lips came down savagely. They hurt her and she cried out, and instantly he released her, breathing stertorously.

"You see?" His voice was dry, emotionless. He could have been a professor discoursing on the three rings of the planet Saturn. "Perhaps, Sarah, you are fooling yourself? You might think about it."

He left, and presently Bertha summoned her to dinner. As always it was served upstairs in Grammy's private sitting room. A little fire crackled in the fireplace and pleasant shadows flickered about the papered walls. After dinner she played the piano for Grammy and it was all very respectable—and dull. Tired of a quiet house, of cretonne-covered furniture, she put on a wrap and hurried out into the moonlight the moment Grammy had fallen asleep on her chair. In the morning, she thought, she'd be sorry again. But another night of wakeful horror? The thought sent her running to her car in the garage . . .

She found him waiting on the quiet street corner, as usual. Wordless, she stopped the car and slid over to the passenger's side of the front seat. It seemed low, sordid, as he gunned the car back to the highway, and back into her mind came the doubts, the fears. What if Grammy found out? What if her friends found out? Suppose the motel were raided for some reason or other and Sarah Peabody was found in bed with one of her grandmother's hired hands?

"It's the last time, Eric."

"Sure, Sarah, sure."

"Not that I'm tired of you, understand. But it's always so

risky. One of these days someone is sure to find out."

"Aw, who cares about a little thing like that? Half your friends are doing it, too."

That infuriated her. She wished hired hands would stop thinking that just because people had money they were bored.

At that point, however, his hand found her knee in the tight nylon stocking.

"Soft," he breathed, "warm and soft."

"I was a damn fool up north, Eric. It seemed to me that a lady was what he wanted. But men don't want ladies—at least not the men who are worth having."

"I sure as hell don't. Look, Sarah, why don't you marry me? That would sure as all get-out be swell. We could live on your money and have a lot of fun."

She wished there was slavery again. That had been the best system of all. Then when you'd wanted a man you could have one without fear the animal would overstep the bounds.

"But I guess you'd bore me after a while," he rumbled. "You're not like my Sue Ellen. My Sue Ellen never freezes up like a damned icicle."

"Shut your mouth, Eric."

He drove her to the motel and went inside to register. She thought it was convenient to have motels. No questions asked, no baggage expected. You paid your money, you stepped into a room, you went to bed. If you did all that in the dark you were never discovered. You made your getaway early in the morning, and who was there to say you weren't still a lady?

In the dark she undressed and hurried to the bed. The sheets felt cold and stiff on her naked skin, the room seemed stuffy.

"You might open a window, Eric."

"To hell with that." He yanked the covers down and all but leaped into the bed. His rough hands fondled her arms. "Right now, Sarah, I want you."

"Can't you try to make it beautiful?"

"I could use a raise, Sarah. I'd like to marry my Sue Ellen."

She pinched his back . . . and wished she hadn't. What an animal he was when he'd been hurt.

She moaned in his arms.

"You're a pretty piece, Sarah. You're so white and soft all over."

It was better than loneliness, she thought, better than the horror. "Damn you, Wallace," she said in the dark. "Damn you!"

Then she began to feel warm and comfortable all over . . .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE BOAT pushed down the St. Lawrence River. It was a cold, windy night and the moon, appropriately, looked like a chunk of yellow ice in the sky. As the boat veered somewhat to avoid running aground on a bulge of land the wind came whipping over the bow to take liberties with Elaine's coat and skirt. She scowled. It seemed to her that the wind had been doing that ever since they'd left colorful Quebec with its sights and its money hungry habitants. Was all the world interested in nothing but sex? What a veritable orgy of sex the honeymoon had been! Wallace might be pushing close to sixty-five, but his interest in feminine anatomy was still the interest of a boy of sixteen. She chuckled. She gripped coat and skirt between her knees and defied the wind to do its worse. She promptly wished she hadn't. The wind changed its course as the boat straightened out in the channel. Now it hammered at her cheek and made her left ear ache. Annoyed, she went back into the lounge.

She found the poker game still in progress. Technically, the players were interested only in the fun of the game. Heaven forgive that money should change hands when the last bet had been called and the cards had been returned to the very helpful and obliging steward! In New York Wallace might be passionately devoted to the game of making money, but up here in Canada his interest began and ended with innocent fun. He wheezed laughter as she dropped onto a chair.

"Full house," he announced, exhibiting his cards. He raked in a little pile of red and white chips. He beamed at the chagrined face of Mr. and Mrs. Luke Ellison. "You overbet. That's a dangerous thing to do. Never overbet your hand."

"Personally," said Mrs. Ellison, "I've had enough."

She was a short, plump woman in her mid-fifties. Her hair was frankly gray and somewhat tousled. Her clothes covered her, which was the best that could be said about them. But it seemed that Mr. and Mrs. Ellison were from Ouray, Colorado, and that they owned one or two gold mines there. Wallace, bless his piratical heart, had promptly taken pity on two bewildered tourists and had insisted that the Ellisons come along with them to Quebec. They were now fast friends.

"Who wants a snort?" demanded Mr. Ellison.

The steward hastened to their table. He took their orders and presently chips and cards had been cleared away. Through the loudspeaker came the strains of dance music, and if you listened closely you could hear, now and again, the shouts and laughter of young tourists having the time of their lives in the dance room below while the boat surged on powerfully toward Montreal.

Mrs. Ellison sighed. "A real fine trip. Me and Mike won't never forget it. You folks have to come to Colorado one of these days. We'll really entertain you, won't we, Mike?"

"Yup."

"We got us a ranch," announced Mrs. Ellison. "We got steers and horses and we even got turkeys. Honey, did you ever see wild turkeys on the range?"

"Don't they fly away?"

Mrs. Ellison guffawed, revealing several front teeth edged with gold. "Ain't that a hot one? Mike, you tell Mrs. Endicott."

"They don't."

"We clip their wings, honey, you see. There ain't a bird alive which can fly with their wings clipped."

"It's possible," said Wallace thoughtfully, "that we may go west some time early next year. My wife and I hope to expand our interests. It's all well and good to say that the important money is in the East. But the fact is that the West has its wealth, too."

"Mike here, he could put you on to something good. Couldn't you, Mike?"

"Yup."

"Talkative cuss, ain't he?" Mrs. Ellison sighed. She reached across the table and gave her husband a fond pat. "The trouble with Mike was that he spent too many years alone in the mountains, prospecting for gold. He got out of the habit of talking, I guess."

Elaine wondered when the poor runt got the chance to talk. She wished Wallace had forgotten he was supposed to go on making money until the day he dropped under the weight of his riches.

It would have been nice to see some of the sights alone. Especially the battlefield where Wolfe had defeated Montcalm and won all of Canada for the English. What a magnificent sight the old fort had been, and the grounds leading up to the fort. She shivered. When the railroad had been disposed of at a fat profit Wallace would take her around the world if she had to club him into doing so.

"Your wife, I notice," said Mrs. Ellison, "don't say much, neither."

"I'm still in my honeymoon daze, Mrs. Ellison. I'm pinching myself to make sure I'm not dreaming."

She slid her chair closer to Wallace. And into the eyes of Mrs. Ellison crept the knowing leer.

"Hey, I keep forgetting that. Mike, I guess we'd better leave the lovey-doveys alone. What do we owe you, Mr. Endicott?"

"Rubbish." Wallace surged to his feet. "We were playing for sport, Madame."

Before the woman could insist he took Elaine by the hand and led her to the stateroom on the top deck. Stifling a prodigious yawn he lowered his bulk to the wicker chair. "Damn fools."

"Can we use them, Wallace? I could honey up to Mrs. Ellison. She likes me. It seems that I remind her of a sister who died. We could invite them to the house for a month."

"It's always possible," he said thoughtfully, "that they can be used. Here's a piece of information, though. Never rush into things. In Montreal we'll bid our new friends good-bye. A month or so from now you'll sit down and write Mrs. Ellison a little note. Just remind her you're still alive. You follow?"

She sat down on the bunk. "You're clever, do you know that? I wish I were that clever."

He recalled the use she'd made of the opportunity he'd given her. How far away Sarah and Virginia were now! "You do all right." He remembered something else. "Damn it, you do too well, come to think of it. Did you *have* to buy a ruby brooch?"

"It was a question of pride, Wallace. I had practically no jewelry to wear. And then I remembered the bauble you'd given Sarah Peabody. Surely, I thought, Wallace would like me to be as well decked out. Then the first thing I knew, there I was in the jewelry store buying that brooch. It was only two thousand. Wallace, what's two thousand to people as rich as we are?"

"If you don't mind, I think I'd like to go on deciding what I can or cannot afford."

She hesitated. She smiled broadly. "I don't want to anger you, Wallace." With a pretty flurry of skirt, legs and lace-trimmed slip she got out of the bunk. She opened her handbag and took out the brooch. She dropped it onto his lap. "The man said it could be returned if it didn't satisfy. Wallace, that's one nice thing about being married to a personage. Stores are always so humble when they're dealing with the wife of one."

He grunted. "Not that you don't deserve it," he said grudg-

ingly. "You were all right. I'll never forget the way Niles looked when he kissed your cheek after the wedding. By God, that expression is certainly worth a brooch."

"No." She went back to the bunk. "I've got what I wanted. You kept your part of the bargain. I'll keep mine. Wallace, it's so wonderful not to have to worry about a dollar any more, do you know that? The fifty you've given me, plus the fifteen I managed to save—why, I'm practically a millionaire."

"Sarah's mad. Sarah's good and mad."

"Oh, she'll get over it, Wallace. A year isn't so long. And if she loves you she'll forgive."

"You're damned tooting she loves me." He thumped his chest. "I excite her, you see. There, that's the trick. Excite a person and you get what you want."

"Like this, Wallace?"

A shapely leg in a sheer stocking dangled from the bunk. It swayed to and fro. "Wallace, would you say I've got a beautiful leg?"

His heart began to drum. In that respect she'd amazed him right from the first night. Always beautiful, always different. There, by thunder, that was her talent! And she wasn't one of those girls who teased, either. When she played she meant it, every last word and wriggle of it. When she dangled a leg as she was dangling her leg now . . .

"My wife," he said, feverishly. "My damned whore of a wife."

"I'm sleepy, Wallace." She stretched out on the bunk, tantalizing in her soft, form-fitting wool dress. "Wallace, aren't you sleepy?"

He gripped the arms of the wicker chair and pushed himself up to his feet. His great body blotted out the light streaming from the wall lamps. He reached down for her.

How many centuries, he wondered, did it take to produce such feminine perfection?

"Was your mother beautiful?"

"I don't recall, Wallace. She was well on in years when she had me. By that time the old poverty had made a wreck of her face and figure. Poverty does that to people, you know?"

"You're all right," he said fervently. "Damn you, you're all right. I like you. There, I've said it. By God, you're not one of the weaklings. I've always despised weaklings. I say this. If you can't stand up to life and lick it then you haven't the right to be alive."

She felt something cold between her breasts. Startled, she opened her eyes.

The ruby brooch was between her breasts like blood, rich with strange, strange fire.

"I thank you for the brooch," she said formally. "I'll treasure it forever."

"You'd better. This damned honeymoon is making me soft. When we're back home I'll be myself again. Then if you buy jewelry without my permission I'll beat you."

With his lips on hers she wondered. With his arms around her, she doubted. In a sudden flaring of passion she suddenly knew the truth about him . . . and smiled.

"Come to my arms," she whispered, "my beamish boy!"

Great day in the morning, she thought, it would work out! She'd struck the jackpot, she had!

The brooch in the place of honor on her bosom, she greeted Otto with a big smile early the following morning. "He'll be along soon, Otto. I left him shaving."

"You look swell, Mrs. Endicott. That there jewel sure shines good, don't it?"

She patted the wrinkled face of wispy Otto. She looked beyond him at Montreal standing fresh and golden in the rising sun.

"It shines very beautifully, Otto. Life, I mean. Did you miss us while we were gone?"

"I seen the sights. I went over to the canal every day and gassed with the guy who works the locks. It was okay."

"Ready to go back home, Otto?"

The pale blue eyes gleamed with a sudden interest. "A city's just a city. Besides, what the hell is Jenson doin' while I'm away, will you tell me that?"

There was a whoop behind her as Mrs. Ellison came along in the warm sun. "I thought we wouldn't see you, dearie. Now you listen to me. We're expecting you to visit us in Colorado one of these days."

"You've been wonderful, Mrs. Ellison. Wallace told me to be sure not to forget to write you."

"Huh, I won't let you forget. I'll keep pestering you with letters until I get me an answer. Coming, Mike?"

"Yup."

The man smiled faintly and gave Elaine's hand a warm squeeze. Down the gangplank they went, while Otto Wagenknecht chuckled.

"Friends of the Boss?"

"They will be. They have gold mines, Otto, isn't that nice?"

He whistled incredulously. "Them folks? Hey, that don't seem fair. Who the hell are they to have gold mines?"

Then Wallace hove into view, his face lobster-red after the shave. Otto carried their luggage to the waiting car, and the honeymoon was over. With a fine disregard for the speed laws Otto bowled across the bridge and on towards the highway near St. Johns. It carried them down to the border over to Vermont. In Rutland they stopped to spend the night. They had dinner at the home of Mr. Fraser.

There was talk about the railroad Wallace had taken over, and with Mr. Fraser in the limousine with them they pushed on in the morning into Massachusetts. Now she had the opportunity to see a really good businessman in action. There was a stop in Pittsfield, a conference in the home of a Mr. Perkins who proved to be the vice-president of the railroad. A long, dour man, Mr. Perkins opened the conference with the announcement that he was herewith tendering his resignation.

Mr. Fraser objected.

Wallace seconded the objection.

In the name of his partner, James Niles, he thirded the objection.

Mr. Perkins then sat down in a leather chair at the window and went into a conference with himself. Presently he announced with a tremor in his voice that he was grateful for the confidence thus displayed.

"How could I do less," he inquired, "than continue with the organization to which I've given my life?"

Now Wallace rose and delivered himself of a short speech. He extolled the brilliance of both Mr. Fraser and Mr. Perkins. It was the wish, he concluded, of all concerned that the two men continue to direct the railroad.

Both Fraser and Perkins now went into conference in the kitchen, while Wallace lit a cigar.

Elaine stared at him. "You'll let them operate it? But why? Why pay them big salaries? Wallace, that's silly."

His logic was simple, devastating. "For the very good reason that I don't know how to run a railroad. You look nice in that suit."

"But I'm cold, Wallace, I'm dreadfully cold. You wouldn't want to buy me a mink coat, would you?"

"I wouldn't." The brown eyes smiled. "The honeymoon's over, you see."

"Until tonight, darling?"

He grunted. "Otto will take you back to Long Island. I think I'll pop over to Boston for a few days."

"Oh, is the Southern Drawl in Boston?"

His several chins twitched. He scratched the pink, bald pate. "She could be, the little scamp. Poor Sarah just doesn't know what to do with herself half the time."

"Give her my regards, won't you?"

"It'll be business."

"It wouldn't make any difference, Wallace. After all, this is just a business arrangement. By the way, would you object if I were to see Ted Underwood? I find that I've missed him of late."

His face congested with angry color. He remembered it was Underwood who'd sipped the champagne from her slipper. "There's a young fellow you're not going to see."

"Want to bet, Wallace?"

The brown eyes flashed. "Yes, I want to bet."

"A hundred will get you two."

The kitchen door opened.

Otto was summoned, and she went on to Endicott House alone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ONCE AGAIN a stir of excitement ran through the foyer of the *Club Piquant*. The doorman ushered the minkclad cause of it through the glass double doors and snapped imperious fingers at the hat check girl. Automatically the hat check girl began to expose another inch or so of perfumed breast—then her face did a double take.

"Geez," she whispered. "Geez!"

"Hello, Millie. Have you an extra hook for this?"

Wistful fingers stroked the soft, lustrous fur. "Geez, it's the real thing, ain't it, Miss Warburton? Gosh, they don't come any fancier than this, do they?"

"Mrs. Endicott," said the doorman with a big scowl. "In the name of us employees, I congratulate you."

She rewarded him with a tip. She glanced at her jeweled watch, saw that she was early for the show, and went out to the purple-lit bar. She sat down on the usual stool at the far end and ordered the usual Barbados Rum Punch. For some reason she was surprised to see the same old diorama of Hawaii on the back wall. Had it only been a month ago? It seemed like years. Or was she just dreaming? Would someone pinch her behind and awaken her to the fact that she was still a working girl with a fortune still to win. She sighed as Carter Nicksen came ambling over. She met his sharp black eyes and smiled.

"Hi, Carter, long time no see."

"Hi, Elaine." He glanced at the tables along the wall under the imitation palms. He saw that their usual was vacant and went over to claim it. It seemed to him that flowing gold came over to sit down on the bench affixed to the wall and he sighed gustily. "There's a dress that must have cost a pile."

"Two or three hundred, I forget which. It's real cloth of gold. Carter, you should see my wardrobe closet!"

"I can imagine." He studied the soft face, the radiant green eyes. "I suppose it's silly to ask if you're happy. Strange, I never thought that people who married for money could be happy."

"How's Kitty?"

"Unhappy." He went over to the bar and got himself a gin fizz. From afar came the music of the orchestra playing for the

dance hour crowd. "She's tried to get in touch with you, but you're always out. Get her messages?"

"I've been busy. Parties, Carter. It seems that everyone out on Long Island wants to entertain the famous, happy couple."

"You want to know about Ted, don't you?"

The question caught her off guard. She blushed, aware of it, and knew that his quick black eyes hadn't missed it. She shrugged a soft, shapely shoulder.

"I never disliked Ted, Carter. If I'd been a different sort, I'd have married him. But I wasn't. I'll tell you something. In life you have to play the cards you've been dealt. I was dealt hunger—hunger for things. It was sharper, always, than a hunger for love. Am I supposed to apologize? But how can I? I didn't arranged to be born this way."

He thought it peculiar that the poverty had warped her but hadn't warped Kitty. Was it because Kitty had a broader point of view? Was it because Kitty's feet were more solidly planted on the ground?

"I wouldn't expect you to apologize. That would be unnatural. Would you be sore, though, if I were to say I'm sorry for you?"

She laughed throatily. She took another deep swallow of her drink and tingled with a sense of well-being. "You still work for a living, I don't. Speaking of which, how's the musical coming along?"

"Finished."

It didn't astonish her. He was one of the strong ones like Wallace and Arthur. When they set out to accomplish something they were always successful. Knowing his gift for music she had a conviction it was a good musical, too.

"Need a backer?"

He quivered. It was tantamount to being asked if he wanted Kitty. "You're damned strange, do you know that?"

"It might be arranged, Carter. Always assuming, of course, there was a spot in it for Kitty. And a job somewhere for Ted."

He fought elation down. "Endicott doesn't back shows. I thought of him, naturally. I took the proposition over to his office. He was politeness itself. He assured me he didn't doubt my genius for a minute. But he was really unable to help me at the present time. So sorry, and all that."

"He told me about it. As a matter of fact, he was angry. He accused me of putting you up to it. Poor Wallace, he's such a suspicious scamp. He's always afraid he'll be used as he uses others." She paused, amused by a memory. "He refused to get

me a mink coat last month. You might take a look at it when you go out. There, that's the difference between successful Elaine, Carter, and all you unsuccessful people. I never take no for an answer."

"It wouldn't have to be financed for a quarter of a million. It would probably be produced for less, but—"

"Five percent for me, Carter, if I find the money for you?"

He had no time to do anything but stare in puzzled silence. Having been informed, at long last, of the Great Lady's arrival, Arthur Balke himself came hurrying into the bar. He snapped imperious fingers at Carter.

"You're supposed to be directing, aren't you? Damn it, the show's about to begin."

Elaine got to her feet with alacrity. "Who's the star, Arthur?"

"Paulette Crane. Ever hear of her?"

"Ted's discovery?"

The answer shot back at her. "He's washed up, Elaine. He was all right, Ted. Sure, I had my differences with him, what owner doesn't have differences with an agent? That's business. The agent always wants more pay for his clients than the owner thinks the clients are worth. But aside from that, I liked Ted. You did a fine job on him. Why didn't you use a knife? It would've been cleaner, quicker."

"They electrocute you for murder if you do use a knife, Arthur. The state is strange that way."

"Very funny." The hard gray eyes went up and down. "You look well enough."

"Drooling, Arthur?"

"This Paulette, she's comfortable in bed. And she's the sort who can be handled. Not that I'm, you understand, complaining about you. But I differ from Ted in this respect. When I've had it I forget it. There's less wear and tear on the nerves."

She went through the bar to the lounge. The rolling of kettle drums excited her, stirring in her a strange longing to get backstage and dress. Three shows a night for a thousand a week. People after you for your autograph, handsome men chasing after your body. It hadn't been a bad life, all things considered. It hadn't been a fortune, but certainly it had never been dull.

"Mind if I go backstage?"

He studied his wristwatch. "After the show's okay, but not now. He's at his apartment, by the way. I just left him there. He's the one you come to see, isn't he?"

A guarded expression came onto the lovely face. "You ask a lot of questions, Arthur, and say a lot of strange things."

He snapped his fingers. "I like him too much to see him go to prison. That's where your husband'll put him if he ever finds out about Ted's chatter. He's got a phobia on the subject. He keeps claiming your husband murdered his first wife. Funny, isn't it?"

"He says *what?*"

Her hand went involuntarily to her throat. He remembered that the hollow of her throat was always soft and warm, that when you touched your tongue to it you could feel the pulse coming through the pure white skin. When she was aroused . . .

"He's been drinking, you see. He's a lush now, Ted is. As I said, you should've done it with a knife. It would've been cleaner."

"I—I see."

To his amusement she didn't go into the Lanai Room to see the show after all. She got her mink coat from Millie and left.

Otto Wagenknecht gaped. He'd just arranged a deal with the owner of the parking lot across the street. For two bucks the guy had agreed to telephone him the moment he saw Mrs. Endicott come out of the Club Piquant. According to the way Otto had figured it, this wouldn't be for a couple of hours, time enough to go to a certain house he knew to make up for all the *no*'s Jenson had given him. After all, a guy couldn't be kept waiting forever, could he?

He heaved a long, pained sigh. He darted across the road and met Mrs. Endicott's thoughtful green eyes.

"Hey, aren't you gonna see the show? The guy across the street was tellin' me it's swell."

"Otto, how much do you like your Boss?"

He fingered his cheek. Hanky-panky? It was all right to think dough was important. Maybe it was. But hanky-panky was important, too. "You want me to take you somewhere and forget I took you? Hell, Mrs. Endicott, you're always swell to me. Why should I tattle?"

"Otto, how did Mr. Endicott's first wife die? Was she murdered? Wallace never told me."

The scrawny man gulped.

"People are saying he murdered her, Otto. Isn't that strange?"

He wheezed it out. "They're—they're crazy!"

"Of course they are, you little fool. But how did she die?"

"Look, you're loaded. I'm takin' you back home."

"I'd like to visit someone, Otto. For a fver?"

He gnawed on his lower lip.

"In any event, Otto, you'll take me and not say a word. I speak to my husband and you're without a job."

The trembles began to bother him. And why was the moon staring at him like that? He didn't like the moon! It was always spying on a guy! Just when you thought it was gone there it was again looking down on a guy. You couldn't get away from it, not even in a damned jungle.

"I want to see my former manager, Otto." She gave the command briskly. "Get the car, will you."

"Cripes, the Boss'll be sore. You know the Boss don't like that guy."

"Otto, he's a drunk. He's a drunk like you. Do you know what you say when you're drunk? Would it be fair for me to blame you for the silly things you say when you're drunk?"

The cold wind blew on his face, steadying him. Then a little smile twitched Otto's lips. Very softly he said, "Cripes, Mrs. Endicott, the Boss don't blame him none for drinkin' champagne outta your slipper that night. I wasn't meanin' that. I was meanin' the Boss don't want you mixed up in business no more."

She caught the slip. "He owes me some money," she said quickly. "Otto, I'll be damned if anyone will cheat me out of money that belongs to me."

"Sure, Mrs. Endicott, sure."

He darted across the road and got the limousine. He picked her up at the curb and drove her to Ted's place. He was a very gallant chauffeur, bodyguard and spy. He scurried across the sidewalk and opened the vestibule door. He pressed the button, and when the click released the lock of the inner door he held it open with his foot. "You want me to wait, Mrs. Endicott?"

"I'll want you in an hour, Otto."

Furious, she hurried upstairs to his studio apartment. Half expecting to find a drunkard, she was thrown off balance by the sight of a pale but very sober face. She met his startled hazel eyes, then stepped into the big room.

He bowed deeply. "An honor, Mrs. Endicott. It isn't often that a man has the privilege of entertaining so distinguished and famous a lady."

She sat down. The room was the usual mess. On the table cigarette butts lay where they'd fallen from the crowded ashtrays; the studio couch looked as though its linen hadn't been changed in a month. She saw that her publicity pictures were

gone, as well as the oil painting she'd given him one Christmas. Burned? She suspected so. He'd always been a child. All weaklings behave like children when they didn't have their own way.

"You could have written, Ted. You could have answered one of my letters."

He sat down. He wore rumpled brown gabardine trousers and an equally rumpled dressing gown. As the robe opened above the waist she saw a dingy undershirt and very pale skin. Absurdly, her heart didn't like that. The sight gave her heart a twist, a pull. She had to fight down a desire to hug him in her arms and tell him it was all right, that it would always be all right.

"You're ruining yourself, Ted. Arthur and I have been talking about you. He tells me you're behaving like a fool."

"I'm doing all right." He boomed defiant laughter. "You look nice and expensive. You're doing all right, too."

"Ted, all my life I've had to have things. You knew that. Everyone knew that. Why should you be surprised that I married for them? Other women have. Other women will. That's the way of the world."

He stirred on the chair. The dress fit her like a second skin. Even with her clothes on, she was gilded Aphrodite under the moon. He wanted her. With every atom of his being he wanted her as he'd never wanted her before. He swallowed while he surged to his feet.

"You want a lover, is that it?"

"Yes, I want a lover. Ted, did you think I'd forget you? Did you honestly believe a fat old man almost sixty-five would satisfy me? That's the damn trouble with you! You're always leaping to conclusions."

He took a tiny step toward her. He laughed tautly. "Why don't you come right out and say you want someone around to protect you from that pig and his murderer!"

It raised the hair along the nape of her neck. She looked nervously at the door, fancying she'd heard a sound. She got up from the chair and moved toward the door. But moving quickly he got between the door and her. His arms closed around her, then strong fingers went to her throat.

"Are you afraid he'll have his murderer choke you?"

"Ted, you're drunk!"

He opened his mouth; he puffed breath into her face. He had halitosis, but there was no scent of alcohol in it.

"You damn fool, why don't you read the newspapers? Why

don't you put two and two together. His wife died in the jungle of Haiti. She disappeared into quicksand, while strolling in the moonlight with her husband, who loves exercise, and her husband's bodyguard, Otto Wagenknecht. Go to the library. Look in the March file of nineteen thirty-four. Then look at Otto Wagenknecht. Why the hell do you suppose he keeps a lush like Otto around? You've heard the way Otto talks to him, so have I. Put two and two together, and what do you have? You have a case of murder, Mrs. Wallace Endicott. You have a—"

He broke off, disturbed by tinkling laughter.

"Listen!"

The laughter surged from her throat and she couldn't have stopped it had her life depended upon it.

"You poor, crazy, jealous fool! Ted, you embarrass me! All along I was giving you credit for intelligence!"

He sank back to the studio couch. "You don't believe me?"

"I don't believe you. And did you ever hear of the slander laws, Ted? Now, really!"

"She was running around fast and loose, Elaine. Oh, it's all ancient history now. You won't find many who'll remember the way she batted around. But there are some. She was talking about a divorce. She was talking about nicking the guy for plenty. Then everything became peaches and cream. They went to Haiti. She never came back. There was no divorce, there was no financial settlement. Isn't that interesting?"

"Look, I'm married to him, Ted. I intend to stay married to him for as long as he wants it. Would you like the cottage, Ted? Would you like to live in the cottage and see me when the cat's away? You damn, beautiful dope. It'll be all right in the end. In the end, we'll be married. But we'll be rich, Ted. Ted, don't you understand? We'll have all the marbles, if you'll just be sensible."

It sickened him. The words jarred forgotten things back into his consciousness. He recalled the happy days of his youth in upstate New York. He recalled the ideals he'd lived for, the things he'd believed in. He wondered what had happened to that guy.

He wondered when the change had taken place.

Was it when he'd met Elaine, or before that?

He passed a trembling hand over his head. "You make me want to puke."

"Ted!"

He looked around for a bottle. There was a bad taste in his mouth that he wanted to kill. "You filthy bitch. You whoring, lying, chiseling, double-crossing filthy bitch!"

It dripped from his mouth like acid and it ate into her flesh. She sprang across the room and slapped his face. "You take that back. Damn you, you take that back!"

He surged to his feet. "You can't ever play it straight, can you? You have to lie, connive. You have to use people, then spit their love back into their faces. See the beautiful Elaine Warburton! See the wonderful singer! See the wonderful whoring success!"

"I'll kill you," she hissed. "As God is my witness, I'll—"

He swung. Roaring with disgust he swung from the floor and landed a solid blow on her shoulder. She screamed. The pain stabbed to her toes, the pain made her sick. Whirling, she tried to take a step to the door.

"Otto," she whimpered, "Otto!"

The door swung open and Otto stepped into the room. As a hand caught her hair Otto lunged forward to strike Ted Underwood's hip with his lowered shoulder.

"Geez," he sighed as the tall guy staggered back. "Ain't you got better sense than to hurt Mrs. Endicott?"

"He's crazy," whimpered Elaine. "He's crazy, Otto."

Why the hell did she bother with small fry? Why?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SHE MADE a charming invalid. The Leroys thought so, Sarah Peabody thought so, the servants thought so. More important, however, Wallace Endicott seemed to think so. Greatly disturbed when Otto brought her home in a wild state of collapse and tears, he personally summoned Dr. Pratt from Westbury and personally assisted that worthy during the long and painful examination. His relieved sigh sounded genuine when Dr. Pratt finally announced there'd been no real damage done. And in the weeks that followed he made a very thoughtful, attentive husband. If business kept him away from the house he saw to it that she had visitors. Kitty Forbes was summoned, as was Carter Nickson. A veritable library was moved into the sitting room of her suite the moment she was able to sit up with her arms in a sling. Were her eyes too tired for reading? Then he read to her himself in a fine, rolling voice that somehow soothed her nerves and made her feel the wrench had been highly worthwhile. Kitty, interrupting just such a quiet evening, rolled her eyes expressively as the Great Man left them alone to chatter about "female inanities."

"You know what, Scanties?"

"What? Kitty, you're positively growing fat. What about your career? What about the part you're to play in that musical Carter composed?"

"I don't care. There's love for you. If a man loves you then you can be fat as two pigs. Or you can lie all bunged up in a chair and he'll still adore you. That's what Napoleon does."

"Adore me? Kitty, how exciting! It isn't every girl who can claim that her husband adores her. Oooh, what a thrill!"

"I'll pull your hair one of these days. I'm serious!"

A gust of wind rattled the windows. Faintly along the glass you could hear the soft whisper of snow. That irritated the girl sitting with her arm in a sling. She wanted to be outdoors in the crisp air, watching winter come to the lovely estate. She frowned as a twinge of pain shot clear down her back to her buttocks.

"How's Ted, Kitty?"

The thin, elfin girl became soberness itself. "All cut up about hurting you. What happened?"

"He gibbered some nonsense about Wallace and Otto having killed the first Mrs. Endicott. I laughed at him and told him to stop being a jealous, drunken fool. That made him angry. He swung before I knew what was happening. Then Otto came upstairs. I guess he heard my scream. Kitty, he saved my life, Otto did."

Kitty shivered, remembering how quickly a knife could come out of the bodyguard's pocket. "I can imagine it. You won't have him jailed, will you?"

A throat was cleared portentously at the door. The figure of Wallace Endicott loomed large in the small sitting room. There was a huge book in his fleshy hands. When he opened it the book turned out to be a newspaper file.

He said, firmly: "Ladies and gentlemen, we're about to bury our dead once and for all. Miss Forbes, will you be good enough to help me with this table?"

The girl giggled. She was beginning to like Wallace Endicott. What a fine husband he was making Elaine! All you had to do was look into Elaine's eyes and see that she was happy. On an impulse she rose on tiptoe and kissed a red, quivering cheek.

He jerked his head back, startled. "Eh?"

"Because you're nice, Mr. Endicott. I'll tell you something. I didn't always like you. But I do now. You're okay."

He harumphed noisily, looking for all the world like an elephant that had just been given a succulent peanut. "I'm much obliged, to be sure. About this table . . ."

The table was duly shoved over to Elaine's chair. Several rather yellowed newspaper pages were turned. He shrugged. "The picture doesn't do me justice, of course, but there's the story."

Elaine looked at the face of the woman. It was a full, rather sensual face dominated by large wide set eyes. Across the graceful forehead a jagged line of bangs ran, giving her an odd flapper appearance.

"She was very lovely, Wallace."

"She was beauty itself." He snorted his nose into a handkerchief. "When she died, I wanted to die. Now let's get one thing straight. The death was duly investigated by the French police. And they did a thorough job, as French police will. There were rumors and they were suspicious. But they cleared me, as those newspaper stories will tell you. Do you want the truth? The truth is that Maria took dope. That's why Otto was around. He was supposed to look after her."

Kitty shivered. She glanced at the photograph and shivered again. "Look, I'd better go home."

Wallace sank onto a chair. "You'll oblige me, Miss Forbes, by remaining a few minutes longer. That—that puppy! That—that insignificant squirt! If my wife weren't grateful to him for past favors I'd have him jailed. How dare he rake through dead coals for scandal? Damn it, I'm mad. I'm good and mad! If he ever so much as troubles me or mine again I'll go after him and get him if it kills me!"

Then, less vehemently he went on. "Where were we? Oh, yes, Maria took dope. And very often she went walking. It was Otto's job to accompany her. But she was clever. Since it was also Otto's job to keep her from the heroin, she developed a certain skill at eluding him. So it was that night. We had a place out in the interior. Deliberately so. The idea was to get her off the stuff and keep her away from it."

A knock sounded on the door.

"Later," he roared.

The knock was repeated, then Hannah came in. "Mr. Endicott," she said hoarsely, "I've got something to tell you."

He swung around roaring. "You get the hell out until I've finished."

"But—"

"Later," sighed Elaine.

"But honey—"

"Hannah, I distinctly recall telling you later."

The woman swung startled eyes to Kitty's face, then went out, slamming the door behind her.

"As I was about to say, we had a place off by ourselves. I was in town, trying to do some business. Otto was out at the place with Maria, and he had orders to watch her. But she gave him liquor and Otto became woozy. She went out into the jungle and one of the servants heard her scream. Otto left the house with the servant and they saw my wife in the quicksand. There is the beginning and the end of it. She tried to take dope once too often, period."

Again wind rattled the windows. In the long, heavy silence Elaine wondered if the wind would shatter the glass panes. She shivered, suddenly feeling cold.

"Wallace, what a ghastly way to die. It must have been horrible!"

He slapped the newspaper file. "It's all there," he said brusquely. "Read it at your leisure. Every damned word of the testimony is there. Murder Maria? Good God, I loved her!"

Again knuckles beat the door and Hannah came in.

"Hannah," snapped Elaine testily, "will you please stop bothering us?"

Kitty wished he'd told the story another time. Now the girl's face was ashen and the green eyes were bright with fever. She clucked and sprang from her chair.

"You're going to bed, young lady. Wallace, how dare you bring such a horrible story into this sitting room. Do you want to make her really ill?"

"A man gets tired," he said dully. "A man gets sick and tired of stupidity. All right. Maria was thinking of getting a divorce. She didn't like her drugs to be kept from her. But I loved her too much to see her go straight down the road to hell. If that's mawkish, it's mawkish. But that's how I felt and—"

"Ted Underwood is dead," said Hannah King.

This wasn't possible, thought Kitty Forbes.

She was in her bed at home, dreaming dreams again. She'd wake up and Carter would be there beside her, kissing her, telling her he loved her, telling her everything would be all right.

This just wasn't *possible!*

From the chair came a moan, a moan of naked horror.

"There's a policeman downstairs who says he is," Hannah went on heavily, as though challenging anyone to doubt her veracity. "He wants to see Mr. and Mrs. Endicott."

Pale but stolid Wallace Endicott lumbered up from the chair. He bent over Elaine and studied her eyes, the twitching lips. "Will you have Jenson call Dr. Pratt, Hannah? I'll see the policeman in a few minutes in the library."

"No!"

The voice made Kitty jump. She leaped forward as Elaine got shakily to her feet. "You damn dope . . ."

Elaine pushed her away. The green eyes glassy, unblinking, she turned and reached for Wallace's arms. "We have guests, you see. We mustn't keep the policeman waiting, must we? Hannah, have the dear flatfoot come upstairs."

Hannah didn't move.

"Or must I go downstairs, Hannah?"

Kitty was sure it was a dream now. Everything was too pat. There was the wind blowing at the windows, the fire was throwing spooky shadows on the wall. Elaine looked like a ghost, and Wallace Endicott was sweating and trembling, and over all the darkness held back only by the flickering tongues of flame and the dim lamplight. She sucked in a great breath of the warm, warm air.

"This is ridiculous, Wallace. We need some fresh air in here. And will you please have the common sense to make her sit down? And you, Elaine, stop carrying on. You're a big girl, remember?"

She opened the window and turned on more lights. With Wallace's help she got the idiot back into the chair and a blanket around her hips and legs. Hearing the heavy tread of footsteps in the hall she hurried to the door and smiled at the red-cheeked policeman.

"Please be as brief as you can. Mrs. Endicott is ill."

"So I've been told, Mum." He took off his cap. He met Wallace Endicott's eyes and shrugged. "I'm afraid it really happened, sir."

"Most regrettable, Officer. I didn't know Mr. Underwood too well, but as you may know, he once managed my wife's career."

"The accident was in the subway, sir. He was drinkin', accordin' to the reports they telephoned us. He fell onto the tracks and a train hit him."

Kitty sat down. Ted dead? No more clever angles, no more jokes, laughter? Who'd be their guest at Sunday night dinner? Good God, who'd teach her to cook?

"New York told me to tell you, sir. I wouldn't have bothered you if New York hadn't told me to tell you."

"That's quite all right. If there's nothing else, Officer, perhaps you'd enjoy a drink in the kitchen before you leave. I—oh, there you are, Otto. Where the devil have you been?"

"Murdering people."

It welled up into a scream.

Then as though it had been strangled in a working human throat, it petered out.

On the chair the body of Elaine Warburton went limp.

It was the memory of that which Kitty carried away with her. It was that memory, vivid and strong in her mind, that made her tremble in Carter's arms back in her apartment.

"Carter, she loved him, she loved him. Carter, the damn fool actually loved him!"

Like any young man in love his first concern was for the object of his affections. He gripped her by the shoulders and gave her a good shaking. "Stop it," he said flatly. "Damn it, behave yourself."

"Carter, see how rich she is! Carter, see the poor girl who's got everything she ever wanted!"

God forgive me, he thought—and slapped her. As she cried

out a pained, gasping protest he walloped her across the other cheek, too. A spasm of fury went across her pale face, then sanity came back into her blue eyes. She rubbed her cheek ruefully. "You—you shouldn't slap so hard."

"He was drunk," he said bitterly. "I know because I was the fellow who gave the final identification. There was a flask in his pocket. Listen, I don't want to give you all the details, but it's a proven fact he was drunk."

"Carter, he was such a nice guy. You—you couldn't ask for a nicer guy."

"But she didn't love him." Noticing her pallor he went to the table and poured her a drink. Although she shook her head and shut her mouth tight like an obstinate child he managed to get something into her.

"That is the important thing to remember. She didn't love him, Kitty."

She looked down at her hands. They'd been good at rolling drunks, she thought, but not as good as Elaine had been. Elaine had always been better at all things like that. Often the difference between eating and not eating had been the way Elaine had gone out in a pinch and snagged a customer.

"Carter, it wouldn't have made a difference if she had. Carter, she's a knife, that's what she is. All her life she's been cutting upward, higher and higher, right for the throat itself. Carter, Elaine's sick."

"Hannah should've known better than to tell her. What the dickens was Hannah thinking of?"

"The funny thing about it, Carter, is that he's in love with her. I saw that tonight. Carter, he told about the death of his first wife. Do you know what he was doing? He was pleading with Elaine. That's what he was doing."

He supposed that accounted for the success. Whatever the undefinable quality was, she had it. She was a bitch. Clear down to the filthy soul she was a whore and a bitch. Yet she had that undefinable something that made them fall in love with her. She was a monster, that's what she was, a love-sucking monster that took but couldn't give back.

He ground his teeth. Then it rose from the depths of him, all the latent horror, all the hate, all the fear men had of the unexplainable, the mysteries they couldn't fathom.

"I would like to break her neck!"

"Carter, she told him. She always told him. Over and over again she told him she didn't love him. You've got to be fair, Carter."

"She could have stopped seeing him. She could have done him that kindness."

"She did. Don't you remember? Don't you remember what happened? Carter, he—he wasn't strong enough, Ted."

He jumped to his feet, his lips drooping. "If I ever see—her again, I'll break her neck."

"Carter, she's my friend!"

"I don't think," he said levelly, "that I want to see you again, either. Bitches. That's what the two of you have always been. Always quick with the bodies, always quick to grasp the advantages. To hell with those you rolled. To hell with those you hurt. All for you, nothing for anyone else."

"Carter!"

He spun away from her. Like agonized sobs the breaths left his throat, his nostrils.

"But whether you know it or not, the hurt is there. And—it bites into a man. And it makes him drink. And it makes him shout damn fool things. Eventually it wrecks his career, himself. She murdered him. She did it just as though she took a knife and slit his throat."

She sprang from the couch and rushed at him. She caught his arm and dug her heels into the rug and pulled. But now it was like trying to hold a raging storm in check. He twisted and knocked her hand away.

"Don't touch me! Keep your filthy hands to yourself, you slut!"

"Carter, listen to me, please . . ."

There were tears, there always were. Ted was dead, but she was weeping and he was supposed to forget Ted because of her tears. He laughed wildly. And now he pushed at her. His hands sank into her clothing and pulled and ripped. Fists beat at his face, long nails raked his cheeks, but he pulled and ripped until she was naked before him.

"Use that!" she shouted. "Use that! That's the weapon, isn't it? That's what wows them every time, isn't it?"

He spat.

As the spit rolled down her firm, proud breasts, he snatched his coat from the chair and left.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE PERFECT housekeeper met the brown eyes of her strange but always considerate employer. She wasn't at all surprised that he was leaving for Virginia. She thought, if the truth could be told, that he should have gone to Virginia a long time ago. She had always liked Sarah Peabody. In her opinion Miss Peabody was a perfect lady, entirely suited in all respects to be the wife of her employer and the mistress of Endicott House. She had wept the day Otto Wagenknecht had told her of the impending wedding. She had gone to her room with the intention of packing and leaving. But the cook had prevailed upon her to stay, pointing out that now more than ever she had a serious duty to discharge to the kind employer who had helped so generously when her mother had needed operations. She wished that the cook hadn't been so persuasive. There'd been nothing but confusion of one kind or another from the moment the harlot had stepped into the house as Mrs. Endicott. She ground her teeth. Accusing Mr. Endicott of murder! That had been the last straw! If she had her way she'd give Mrs. Endicott's buttocks a real blistering with a strap!

But of all this, of course, the perfect housekeeper said nothing. Instead she looked out through the doorway at the limousine waiting in the snow. "Will you be back, sir?"

He rammed the fedora lower over his big bald head. "I don't know. Damn it, Jenson, I just don't know!"

"Am I expected to remain, sir? Miss Peabody implied that you were thinking of turning the house and the grounds over to Mrs. Endicott."

He stopped abruptly. He spun. But it was the bleat of a lamb, not the roar of a lion that came from his lips. She longed for the roar, longed to hear him shout in his bawdy way, "Damn your breasts, wench, who the hell built this house?"

Even obscene language, she thought, would be better than his pale look of uncertainty, confusion.

"I don't think it'll come to that, Jenson." Touched by the emotion visible on her face, he went back to her and gave her arm a little pat. "In any event, you'd stay with me. We've all been through a lot together, Otto, you, the cook, me. I fancy something can be arranged to everyone's satisfaction."

"Murderer!" came the voice from the head of the stairs. "Filthy murderer!"

He slapped a hand to his thigh. "You'd better look after her, Jenson." He shook his head, as though trying to clear it. "I would like to know just one thing. Will you tell me why my luck with women is always bad?"

The perfect housekeeper startled him by breaking down for once.

"Perhaps," she said, "because you don't respect them."

While he was still gaping, she went upstairs to deal with Mrs. Endicott. But a door slammed in her face. Sighing, she went on to her own room on the third floor . . .

Said Hannah, critically: "You're overdoing it, honey. You keep on and they'll clap you into an asylum."

"He's leaving, isn't he? Hannah, you couldn't figure out a way to make Jenson leave, too, could you? And Otto?"

Always, thought Hannah, the wheels spinning within wheels. Everything was grist to the mill, whether it was a man's body or a man's thoughts or a man's love. She was a snowball, thought Hannah, rolling downhill. She picked up every flake and got bigger and bigger as she bowled along. A whore, then a lousy singer and striptease artist and then a star in her own name. And now there she stood in a satin nightie and a mink coat practically Queen of the May. Not because she was beautiful. Other girls were, too. Not because she had a voice. Other girls had better voices. No. It was because she had a mind, and a rock for a heart. That was the story behind her success! She had a mind that could use every advantage, and since she didn't have a heart she didn't care who the hell she hurt.

"Baby," whispered Hannah, "it's good there aren't more like you. What a world it would be if there was!"

Elaine went to the bay window of the sitting room. She saw the limousine move slowly through the snow toward the gate. Around the ornamental pool it went, then along through the trees all hung with icicles. Then down the little hill it dipped, gathering speed. It was a house worth fighting for, worth dying for, but Napoleon was in full retreat. It made her laugh. Hail the great Napoleon!

"I think he'll settle for a million, don't you, Hannah? I mean, it would be cheap at the price. It's all very well to talk about being absorbed in business. But there isn't a man alive who doesn't like his peace, his love, when the day's over. Poor Wallace, I suspect he neglected to remember that at the time the railroad seemed so important."

"Honey, you want to know something?"

"What, Hannah?"

"He didn't marry you for no railroad. All that stuff about a railroad and money being that important to him—that's crap."

"Do you really think so, Hannah?"

The beautiful green eyes grew gently mocking.

"I think that's the bill of goods the guy sold himself. I think that the guy wanted to believe it, because then it wouldn't be cheapening the great Napoleon when he married a tramp. Yeah, I think that's the whole story."

Still gazing out the window, Elaine saw the car push out into the highway. The big bronze gate swung out. It was too far away to be heard, but she fancied she heard the clang of steel upon steel. It sent a quivery sensation running up and down her spine. Now the situations were reversed. Now he was outside and she was inside. She was glad she'd never loved. When you loved, she thought, you set yourself up for defeats such as Wallace was now suffering. Or you let the love twist you up inside and make you do damn fool things like getting drunk and falling into the path of a rushing subway train.

She scowled. "Was it a nice funeral, Hannah?"

"Real pretty. That singer at the Club sang a couple of hymns. And the minister made a real nice speech. There was lots of flowers."

Long nails dug into tender palms. "He was a no good bastard, Hannah, wasn't he? I mean, he was weak. If he couldn't get what he wanted, then he wouldn't play."

"I always liked Ted Underwood. Naturally I didn't think you ought to marry him. That would've been poor business."

Now the magnificent body whirled and the voice lost its tight control, cracking beneath the stress of the emotion. "I tried to give him something, Hannah. But he had to be proud. He had to go idealistic on me. He had to slug me."

Hannah whistled. "Hey, was that it?"

"That's always it, Hannah, when you try to be generous. People don't appreciate generosity. They need the whip or something."

She went back to her bedroom, closing the door behind her. She glanced around the pale green room thoughtfully. When the house was hers, she decided, this would be Kitty's place. It would be good for Kitty to get away from New York for awhile. The girl just couldn't take it. She'd always been that way. As long as life developed the way she wanted it to, Kitty was hot stuff. Let there be a check, a disappointment, however,

and abruptly Kitty's nerves played out. In a sense she wished that they'd not decided to come to New York to make their fortunes. There was money now; there'd be more once she'd cracked down on Wallace. But the whole experience had certainly been lacking in fun. It had been all work and little play. And when at last she'd managed to find some real sport, Ted Underwood had had to go sentimental on her.

Was it cold in the grave? When you were dead were you aware of such things. People were always saying that the dead felt nothing, but the people who did the talking weren't dead. Suppose he was bitter cold down there in his coffin? Suppose that for all eternity he'd be bitter cold? A cry came from her lips, and promptly Hannah knocked on the door.

Why was Hannah always hanging around? Did Hannah think she had to be guarded or something? Did Hannah think she'd really crack up? Of all the idiots! Didn't Hannah still respect her? Didn't she understand it had been an act? Good heavens, surely Hannah realized that she didn't love Ted, that she'd never loved Ted? A blind, unreasoning rage possessed her. On the verge of an explosion she took several quick steps to the door. But the cold of the knob against her palm distracted her. She drew her hand from the knob, startled, annoyed.

"I'm going out, Hannah," she called. "Have the chauffeur get the car out, won't you?"

"Hey, it's cold outside!"

She ignored the protest. She went to the wardrobe closet and slid the door back. Black? It would be practical. It would be respectful to Ted's memory, as well. And she did owe Ted that much, didn't she? Give the poor weakling his due; he'd done a lot for her. What had she been before she'd met Ted? What had her future been before he'd come into her life to take over the management of her so-called career. Strictly speaking, he was as much responsible for her current success as she herself was. She'd not have been in Anastasia's Place in the Village to beguile Napoleon, if it hadn't been for Ted. If it hadn't been for Ted . . .

She went back to the door, recognizing the knock as Jenson's. She hesitated, then swung the door open. "Yes, Jenson?"

The stately housekeeper smiled. "You have a visitor, Mrs. Endicott. It's Mr. James Niles. He's down in the living room. I told him you'd been ill but he refused to take no for an answer."

"As a matter of fact, Jenson, I'm beginning to feel much, much better. Incidentally, wouldn't you like a vacation?"

The woman's eyes narrowed. "I think my duty is here, Mrs. Endicott." She tried to make a little joke of it. "You know, I've given the best years of my life to this house. I'd hate not to be in while Mr. Endicott is away on business."

"Virginia, Jenson?"

"Why, he told me he had important business in Boston, Mrs. Endicott. He said something about the railroad. He seemed very much disturbed. This past month has been hard on your husband, too. He loves you so. It's made him almost ill to see you—so upset."

"That's the thing that sticks in your craw, isn't it, Jenson? You remember me as just another girl who used to come out here to help Napoleon spend a dull evening. You remember me as a sucker he tried to use. And now here I am and he loves me and that sticks in your craw."

"Mrs. Endicott, perhaps you'd better return to bed."

She patted the woman's cheek. It was a rather pretty cheek. In fact, she suddenly realized, Jenson was a rather lovely woman with her tall, statuesque body, her flaxen hair, her clear blue eyes. She wondered why Wallace had overlooked beauty so close to home. She laughed dulcetly.

"I'm really quite all right, Jenson. And I don't blame you a bit for feeling annoyed with me. As a matter of fact, it really does you credit. Loyalty isn't easily found in this world. Do tell Mr. Niles I'll be downstairs in a few minutes?"

"Yes, Mrs. Endicott." In the hall Jenson paused. "About the car. Do you think it's wise to go out today? The roads are rather icy and it is rather cold."

"Perhaps I'll stay indoors, Jenson. We'll see."

She went back to the bedroom. She contemplated the black she'd thought of wearing, then crumpled it into a ball and tossed it to a chair. He was dead and that ended it. The past was dead, too. The moment, wasn't that all that really counted?

She decided red would suit the occasion nicely. She put the suit on and fluffed her hair around her head. It seemed to her that her cheeks were dreadfully pale. But she rather liked them that way. The dead white gave her an unearthly look, and what wonders it did for her eyes! She wondered if James Niles liked the unearthly type. She wondered what he'd come to the house to see her about. She had remembered to thank him for his wedding present? It was a nice oil painting, if you liked oil paintings. According to Wallace, it must have cost the man five hundred dollars at the very least. This plus the loan had made

him the biggest booster of the marriage. Had she thanked him for the loan?

She hurried downstairs to the living room. Trembling with excitement she struck a pose in the doorway as he rose, then moved forward with the good old roll of the hips and the old warmth in her green eyes. She took his cold hand and gave it a warm squeeze.

"How nice, Mr. Niles. It's too bad my husband isn't here. This is the first time you've visited us since the marriage. But there's business of some kind or other to do up in Boston."

He nodded. He had a very clear notion of where Wallace had gone because Sarah had telephoned from Virginia that her grandmother's illness would make a visit inconvenient at the present time. It had been a beautifully told lie. He preferred the direct Elaine Endicott approach. He preferred tramps who were always themselves.

"Heard you were ill. But it seems that someone was telling me fibs. You certainly don't look as though you've been ill." He hesitated while color stole up his cheeks. "As a matter of fact, Mrs. Endicott, you look very well, and quite beautiful."

"The death of my manager, Mr. Niles. I—no, you must call me Elaine, and I'll call you Jimmy. I don't care how important you are in the business world, I won't go around saying Mister to a good friend such as you."

He bowed easily, smoothly. He felt at home with her. All of her was there, visible to the eyes. You looked at her mouth and saw the greed, you looked into her eyes and saw the hunger. You could peg her. But Sarah! That had always been the trouble. Sarah had always been inordinately difficult to size up. Just when he felt that he'd gotten to know Sarah, she'd do something or say something to confuse him anew.

"I prefer to be called Jimmy, as a matter of fact." He glanced around the big, lovely room with its mahogany furniture and magnificent paintings. "Wallace does things well, doesn't he? My place isn't nearly as attractive. Or is it your woman's touch?"

"His first wife's touch, Jimmy. Wallace wants it kept this way. He's a sentimental man. He never seems to understand that the past must be forgotten. Not all the tears a woman had to shed will bring back a single moment."

"It should console you to know that your manager didn't suffer. Perhaps that's the best way to go, when you're at the peak of your handsomeness and strength. When you're older you'll realize there's no pleasure in decaying inch by inch."

"God forbid!"

His blue eyes widened. Then quickly came a smile. "But I came to cheer you up! Good heavens, perhaps it's this living room? Come to think of it, it's morbid to keep it just as the first Mrs. Endicott left it." He sighed and looked at the distant fireplace. It came rolling from his lips as though it were a sudden inspiration: "I do wish you were well enough to go out. That would do you worlds of good."

She went over to the windows, turning her back on him to hide her smile. How many times had it begun that way? How many times had the quiet approach been used? And what did James Niles hope to gain?

"I was on the verge of going out when you called, Jimmy. I've been cooped up long enough. I need some fresh air, a change of scenery. Perhaps I'll go to Florida. Wallace says it's always lovely down there in December. He'll be gone a month at the very least. A vacation . . ."

"We'll dine. Then we'll dance. And if Wallace has any complaints to make, you send him directly to me. I'm losing my good opinion of Wallace. How dare he leave a lovely wife to sit and perish of boredom at home? He should have taken you to Boston with him."

She turned and discovered him standing just two or three feet from her, the glow of masculine triumph bright in the blue eyes.

He was very attractive in his sober blue suit. She thought the white in his black hair made him look distinguished. She wondered if he'd be any fun in a bed. That had been the worst part of feigning illness. Celibacy! She didn't care what anyone said, celibacy was unnatural, vile.

"He's angry with me," she said shortly. "You might as well know. I cracked up when my manager died and said all sorts of things in my delirium. I think he wants to divorce me."

He nodded, having expected that. Then he became very exciting to a girl who wanted to play.

"Shall we be frank, Elaine? Shall we say, for instance, that I never for a moment believed love was involved?"

"I didn't imagine you believed that."

"A man wants his woman, Elaine." He thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and stared broodingly out the window at the grounds heaped high with snow. "That seems to be the law of nature. I wanted Sarah, and badly enough to authorize a loan at five per cent in order to get her. The loan would have been made in any event, since it was good business. But Wallace, of

course, had no knowledge of that. So Wallace and I had a little chat. And in the course of that chat I managed to convey the news that I'd be much more apt to listen to reason provided—well, you know the rest."

"And Wallace loves me. Isn't that amusing, Jimmy? The poor fool actually loves me."

He said, huskily, "That doesn't make him a fool, my dear. Where would you like to go?"

"The *Club Piquant*."

He understood why and heaved a long, long sigh as she went upstairs to dress. He wished he understood Sarah as well as he did a scheming little slut. Life would be easier, infinitely pleasanter, if he did.

He smiled at the housekeeper who had come into the room. "Jenson, did Wallace have the manager killed?"

"No, sir. Nor his wife, for that matter. Mr. Endicott is a sadly misunderstood man, sir."

"I don't like him right now, Jenson. You may tell him that."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE DOORMAN was stiff, the hat check girl was distant. The summoned Arthur Balke came testily from his office, stared at the voluptuous woman he'd loved to tumble and came to the brink of saying there were no tables available in the Lanai Room. He had a good memory for faces and names, however. It was his boast that he never forgot what a famous customer looked like, and as he considered the face of the slut's escort the wheels began spinning around in his mind. He did a sudden double take, then hurried forward with unctuous good cheer.

"An honor," he intoned, his voice giving the hat check girl her cue. "A signal honor, Mr. Niles, if I may say so."

Around the counter came the voluptuous blonde with the usual extra inch of perfumed breasts on display. It was remarkable how quickly she got Elaine's coat off, and how difficult it was for her to deal with the coat of James Niles. But presently she finished her tasks and the couple were led into the dimly-lighted and badly patronized Lanai Room.

The doorman sighed. "I'll have to bang your bottom again, honey. Ain't you got no sense of decency?"

"Cripes, one can always hope for a fat tip, can't one?"

"With the razor strap, honey. Geez, ain't you never gonna learn to be a lady?"

"Geez, can you eat respectability? And you shut your big fat yap! You bang my bottom once more and I'll walk out."

The doorman gaped.

"What's respectability done for me, will you tell me that? Look at everyone bowing to the whore! Look at the bigshots who like to go out with her. To hell with you! All I ever get from you is crap. Hell, I don't have to work that hard for crap. You can get crap from anyone without undressing for it."

The doorman hurried out into the cold, lonely night. He leaned against the facade of the brick building and spat. That was life for you. You were up, you were down. One month you couldn't keep the crowds in order, the next month you wished to God you had crowds to worry you. It would be a lousy Christmas. There wouldn't be bonuses this here Christmas. In fact

they'd be lucky if Mr. Balke gave them a cheap bottle of hootch.

"Some folks," he lamented, "has all the luck."

It wasn't fair, he brooded. Why the hell should the whore have it so good while decent folks had to stand out in the cold and half freeze for a lousy buck?

He went back into the vestibule. He pushed the big, double-glass doors open and stepped into the foyer.

"But I love you," he roared. "Ain't that something?"

She guessed it was. But she still wished she could step into Mrs. Endicott's panties for a few days. Cripes, imagine having mink and jewels and a great big estate on Long Island!

Arthur Balke seated his former star with a flourish. He snapped his fingers at headwaiter Michael and went back to his office to go through the month's accounts. He looked at shabby Kitty seated on the straight-backed chair and shook his head.

"Can't help you, Kitty. Oh, I'll give you some dough if that's what you need. But no job. You're hitting the bottle too much. Besides, all we've got is a singer now. Crazy the way things work out. We hit our peak back in August. None of us knew it at the time, but we hit our peak the night Endicott came in the hope of patching things up with Elaine."

"I don't need a dollar. I'm pretty, Arthur. I can go out on the street even on a cold night and find a dollar. I want Carter."

"If I knew his address I'd give it to you. Look, why don't you patch things up with Elaine? She's out in the Lanai Room with James Niles—you know, the bigshot financier? She'll always have more than she can use. And to give the bitch her due, she's always been your friend."

"She did it, Arthur! Carter's blaming me for something I never did. I never killed people or hurt people."

"Remember when she got the hike to a thousand, Kitty? Part of the contract involved you. I had to agree to employ you for as long as I employed her. You see?"

"And actually, she didn't do it, either. It was just one of those crazy things." Her face ashen, her eyes haunted, Kitty looked at the bottle on the desk. "Let me have another drink, Arthur."

"Help yourself."

He sat back on his chair while she did. Dimly through the closed door came the sound of a rich contralto voice. It struck a responsive chord in his memory, and for a few moments he had the queer sense that the clock had been turned back. Elaine was still the star, Kitty was still an engaging rascal if not a

very skillful dancer. And Ted was alive and Carter was writing the music and directing the show and the crowds were all but storming the doors.

"I guess I'd better have another drink myself. I could have sworn that was Elaine singing."

"It was." Kitty sat down, crossing her shapely legs. "She's got another sucker. Don't ask me why, but singing that way is a habit of hers." A thought made her snigger. "Arthur, there's no one on earth who'll ever stop Elaine. Her heart died a long time ago. And when you haven't got a heart you can't be hurt. And when you can't be hurt you go on and on, winning bigger and better things. Did you say Niles? Well, that's her speed now. And after Niles it'll be someone else."

He hated the thought. "Every time I look at her I see a corpse. Every time I smell her perfume I smell the flowers at the funeral. Roses! Why the hell did she have to send roses? Roses are for love."

"What love she had for anyone, she had for Ted."

"Now everything's smashed. Now it doesn't seem fun any more. You know what I'll do after the New Year's rush? I'll sell out for what I can get and start up somewhere else. It's not the same place any more."

Kitty nodded. She was going somewhere else, too. New York was too cold. It was too big. It mixed a girl up. It made her dream dreams she shouldn't dream. It made her a lush, and when you were a lush you fell from a subway platform right in the path of a train.

"I'll be leaving, too, I guess. You sure you won't tell me where Carter is?"

He studied the blue eyes, the wretched face. And he was surprised to feel a twinge of pity. People who got dizzy on the merry-go-round, he thought, had no right to ride the gold horse. They were always apt to fall off, as Kitty had.

"New Orleans, Kitty. I got a letter from him the other day. He's playing the piano in some joint down near the Mississippi. He asked about you, incidentally."

"Arthur!"

"Maybe you should go there, Kitty? I don't know. Who can say you're to blame or Elaine? Things happen. There, I guess that says it all. They just happen."

"I love the bastard, Arthur."

"I guess you do."

"I don't care where he goes. Arthur, I'll follow him."

She hurried out into the Lanai Room, stepping into the dimly lit interior just as Elaine finished her song at the piano.

"Hi, Elaine."

The green eyes rounded. Then the smile flashed brightly and color came into the pale face. "Hi, Kitty. Want a drink? Oh, let me introduce you. Miss Kitty Forbes, may I present Mr. James Niles. Kitty's my best friend, Jimmy. You really ought to buy her a drink."

"No time, Scanties."

James Niles decided that perhaps another drink wouldn't hurt him.

"I'm pushing off for the South. That is, if you have some extra money."

"Kitty Forbes!"

"You have to play them as they fall, Scanties. My card came up the ace of hearts. Carter's down there playing the piano in some joint."

"But I want you to live with me, Kitty!"

"A couple of hundred would be nice. I'd pay it back."

One by one, thought Elaine. All the men she'd ever known, all the women. It became tiresome, after a while. When you found people you liked, people you wanted to keep, why couldn't you have them around you always?

"If you're short," said James Niles, "I have some spare cash with me."

"It won't be any good, Kitty. If he'd loved you he'd have stayed, no matter what. But you won't listen, will you?"

"I love him. I guess that's the important thing. Golly, Mr. Niles, I'm very grateful. I'll repay it as—"

"You'll keep it, Kitty."

Elaine got up and took the girl into the ladies' room. She waved her to a couch and dismissed the colored maid with a small tip.

"Wallace and I are washed up. We were washed up from the beginning, but it had to be profitable, you understand?"

Kitty stared.

"He's not happy with me any more. I've been a bad girl, Kitty. I kept accusing him of murder. His nerves can't stand it. So he's gone down to the Southern Drawl for consolation. He'll want a divorce when he comes back. For a settlement, he'll get one. Then if Carter—look, we've been through a lot, haven't we? I've got the right to help you, haven't I?"

"I'll bawl in another minute. Look, are you trying to tell me

you love me? Well, you don't have to be so—so angry about it. Sure we've been through a lot. Most of it bad. And we'll stick to one another, too. But right now . . ."

"Kitty, I swear to God I tried to do the right thing for Ted. Kitty, you believe that, don't you?"

Kitty's eyes wavered. "I—I guess you did. I guess it wasn't your fault you didn't love him."

Elaine sat down, a tremulous, flashing figure in gold lame. She remembered she'd been in gold the last time she'd seen Ted. She remembered that for a moment, for one final, precious moment, he'd wanted her.

"I muffed it, Kitty. I could have put it differently and it would have been all right. But I was upset because of his fool talk about Wallace. And I wanted him and—well, I tried to make him my lover. It was all I had to give, but give me credit for offering that, damn you!"

It hit Kitty then, and made her gasp. "Elaine! Elaine, you did love him, you did!"

"What's love, Kitty? Is it sleeping with a man, working for a man? I don't know. Maybe I did love him. Maybe in his funny weak way he was just what I wanted. But I didn't want him enough. The moment Wallace asked me to marry him I forgot Ted. I—"

"I think you've lost, Elaine." With an effort Kitty brought herself back under control. She got up and stood leaning against the wall. "I think that no matter what you win, you've lost."

"Money buys so many things, Kitty. And people don't push you around when you have money. No one will push me around any more. Not Wallace or flatfeet or James Niles or anyone. Kitty, I've clawed through the damned jungle, I have. Kitty, none of them can hurt me any more."

"You killed him, Elaine. I'm sorry. I still love you, I think. It—it was an accident. But you *did* kill him."

"Kitty!"

"We shouldn't have come to New York. It was a bad move. We're small town girls, Elaine. We should have stayed where life isn't so confusing. That was our trouble. We hit the big time before we were ready for it."

"I'm rich, Kitty. I'll be richer."

The voice was charged with excitement. In the green eyes flamed the old zest for battle. Now Elaine sprang from the couch, threw the copper-red head back and laughed.

"Look, honey, should you be out? Hannah tells me you've had a rough time."

"Kitty, don't you see what's happening? James Niles is going to trick me. He's going to get me drunk and take me to his apartment and undress me. Then the door will open. There I'll be in the nude before the detectives, the photographers, before Wallace and the rest of his witnesses."

"You're—you're crazy!"

"Am I?"

"Why? Just answer that. Why?"

"He wants the Southern Drawl, that's why."

"But—"

"Jimmy and I have a secret, Kitty. It's worth a million dollars to me, or life as a Great Man's wife forever."

Kitty stumbled to the door. She wrenched it open. "I'm clearing out. You damn fool, it won't help. Nothing will help you now, nothing!"

Elaine was amused. She examined her reflection in the mirror and added just a shade of red to the plump lines of her lips. She supposed there was the reason she was rich and Kitty would always be poor. Kitty had never yet seen opportunity standing at the door. All her life Kitty's vision had been poor. Yes, and Kitty's mind was poor, too. If it weren't then Kitty's mind would recognize that love was opportunity itself. Love weakened the fighting spirit and dulled the senses. When you loved you thought of but one thing, and there you were, setting yourself up to be knocked flat. She wished poor Kitty had learned that little truth a long time ago. If she had, then Kitty would have risen above love. Then Kitty would be rich, also, and there'd be nothing on earth Kitty couldn't have. The world was so full of men. And so many of the men were paupers. And if you were rich you could choose them to suit your different moods. As for the rest . . .

She turned, distracted by the throat clearing of the maid.

"Yes, Ellen?"

"There's a gentleman waiting outside, Mrs. Endicott."

"A man in a blue suit and a streak of white in his coal black hair?"

"That's the one, Mrs. Endicott."

"Ellen, I have a secret for you. He isn't a gentleman."

"Huh?"

"But he is useful, Ellen. He's made just one mistake. He's

forgotten it's a dirty sort of game, hardly the sort any respectable, nice people can play with skill."

"Mmmm mmmm. Ain't that somethin'?"

Elaine thought it was. She considered her shapely body was something, too. She thought, in fact, that it was a million dollars walking around clothed, quite properly, in gold.

Humming, she went to the door.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SMILING AS though the matter were of no importance now, James Niles added another log to the fire in his walnut-panelled living room. He turned, a rather distraught figure in a polka dot dressing gown as the remarkably beautiful Mrs. Endicott came in from the hall. The gown caught the light emanating from the fire and intensified it magnificently. When she crossed the room with that rolling saunter of hers she gave the appearance of being a moving tongue of flame. James Niles moistened his lips. With a wistful smile he took her momentarily into his arms and kissed the warm, pulsating hollow of her throat.

He strained her to him convulsively.

"I begin to understand Wallace, at last," he muttered. "You're—bewitching."

But she knew better. No woman would ever really mean very much to James Niles. His world was business and business was his woman. Oh, he might play at hanky-panky now and again, but his heart would never be in it. He was dust when he needed to be earth. He was the dust of the ledgers, the dust of his dry, dry thoughts. She hoped Wallace wouldn't be too long in coming. Distinguished looking though he was, he couldn't hold a candle to Wallace's rugged appeal. Fat though he was and homely, with his bald head and quivering jowls and button-like nose, Wallace was a man.

"Maybe I love Wallace in my peculiar way?" she thought. "Maybe that's why I'm here?"

"Tell me about yourself, Jimmy."

If he was like most of the men she knew, that would keep him talking for hours. She wondered what time the dramatic entrance had been set for. Midnight, no doubt. That way all the detectives and photographers would have a chance to go home and get a good night of sleep. "Were you always rich?"

He rose to the bait momentarily. "As a matter of fact, the tragedy of my life is that I have always been very rich. Great wealth is a serious obligation. To handle it properly requires a special training, which I received. I recall—but come, you're the lady of mystery. You captivated the fancy of Wallace Endicott. You married him and brought him, you might say, a

dowry of five million dollars in cash. Where did you come from, what did you do, where are you going, and . . . ?"

"It's not that way at all, Jimmy. Wallace was just a roue who found enticing flesh one night in a honkytonk called Anastasia's Place in Greenwich Village. He fell in love with me. He didn't like that because, obviously, I was a whore. But he did. And one day it seemed necessary to marry me. Not for love, because a Napoleon couldn't love a whore. No. There was a business reason. Jimmy, let me ask you a question. You don't lend anyone five million dollars just like that. You certainly wouldn't lend it to a man just to get rid of him. No. I had a long chat one night in Canada with a very shrewd, taciturn gold mine owner, a fellow by the name of Ellison. I gave it to him as a hypothetical story and he laughed."

He sat down on the club chair. Intuition told him that a climax was coming, that the girl was mind, as well as body; spirit, as well as sensuality. Had she been gulled or was it Wallace who'd been gulled?

"Let me give you some Scotch then."

"Oh, I'll be undressed at the proper time, Jimmy."

He started. He felt color burn into his cheeks. He jumped up and poured himself a drink, a real snorter. It burned in his throat, it exploded in his stomach. "You'll what?"

"Anyway, Jimmy, Ellison laughed. He said that anyone would make such a loan on such a strategically placed railroad for such a return. You see? Wallace didn't have to get the money from you. But it looked better to him that way. Jimmy, it's always the same story. Men are comical, really they are. They think they're direct, but really they're not. Women are much more direct, much more honest with themselves."

He liked the sound of her voice. It was melodious. It filled the room with rich, warm echoes, and gave the room a kind of life it had never had.

He found these strange, strange thoughts indeed. Her green eyes were so hypnotic. The liquor was so strong!

"You knew all that, didn't you, Jimmy? You knew little about women, but a great deal about men. That's logic, isn't it? You wouldn't still be enormously rich if you didn't know most men better than they know themselves."

He said, pompously, "I find all this very interesting."

She inclined her head gravely.

"So you see, Jimmy, I'm not remarkable at all. I simply recognized love when I saw it, and rode along with a gag. I'm not an idiot. Jimmy, I've been in so many places, I've done so many,

many things. And I've learned a great many things as a result. In a man's own house, for instance, I know that you aren't permitted to eavesdrop if Napoleon doesn't want you to. So I did what I thought he expected me to do. I left in a huff. I had Ted Underwood drink champagne from my slipper. The pride of Napoleon had to be saved, eh? He had to be forced, against his will—oh, so very much against his will—to marry me."

There was a sound out on the street. It could have been a tiger ranging the street, seeking its kill. But she rather doubted that. She had a notion it was much more likely that Wallace had come with all his minions to fall flat on his face for the second and last time.

"We should be in the bedroom, shouldn't we? Jimmy, is the Southern Drawl with him?"

"The what?"

"Miss Peabody, the girl you so foolishly love?"

He jumped to his feet. "What madness is this? There's been madness in your mind all evening. I have a good idea to send you packing."

"But you love me, don't you, Jimmy? All men love all women and bed's such a cozy place to be."

He gripped her roughly by the hand. He growled in his throat and led her up a circular staircase to a bedroom on the second floor. It was an austere place, certainly not the master chamber. That offended her.

"Jimmy, unto Aphrodite must be given her due. I simply refuse to be seduced in a guest room like a—a pretty servant."

He began to sputter. But a strange thing happened to the gold lame gown. Something seemed to give at the back. She cried out and made a frantic effort to preserve the privacy of her body, but the gown slid down her figure much too quickly.

"Good lord," breathed James Niles. "Good lord!"

He rushed to her as the door opened downstairs. His arms closed around her. He picked her up and carried her into the master bedroom.

Now the steps were heavy on the stairs. It sounded as though a whole army were ascending the stairs.

"I knew all the time, Jimmy," she told him as he lowered her gently to the mattress.

"It's my business to know things like that, Jimmy, just as it's your business to understand the intricacies of the stock market. Jimmy, you'll hate me in the morning."

He stared.

It was then that the screams began, the frightful screams

he'd remember for as long as he lived. And her hands became active, ripping at her panties, and then his dressing gown. There was no making her behave. He felt pain on his cheeks, felt the wetness of his own blood.

She was insane!

Merciful heaven, she was insane!

He cried out for help as she came at him again. Her knee drove savagely into his abdomen and now fear gripped him, horrible fear. Automatically he swung, and although he didn't strike her she gave a loud, melodramatic wail and sagged in a sobbing heap to the floor.

The door crashed open.

Roaring like a bull, Wallace Endicott charged in, surrounded by the detectives, the photographers, with the Southern Drawl giggling at his side.

Flash bulbs glared. "I seen it," Otto piped. "Boss, I seen everything. I'll be a—"

Then suddenly there was no sound at all. It became apparent to one of the detectives that if someone had been gulled that someone was not the tidy piece sobbing on the floor and crying "Rape!" in a voice to wake the very dead.

The private detective helped the unfortunate girl to her feet. He stared at the tattered panties, at the scratches on her thighs, at the scratches on the face of James Niles.

"Brother," he said.

For emphasis he added, "Brother!"

Across the room a sobbing, naked figure flashed. To a window the sobbing, naked figure went, and the window was opened to the cold, the blowing wind.

"Police!" screeched a voice. Then it screeched a word lower Fifth Avenue didn't often hear. "Rape! Rape! For God's sakes, rape!"

"She's crazy," breathed James Niles. "She's crazy."

Wallace Endicott gestured imperiously. The wisp of a man with the white hair hurried to the woman at the window. "Cut it, Mrs. Endicott, cut it."

She turned, sobbing, and flung herself into Otto's arms. "I want my husband. I want my husband. Please, I want my husband."

"He's right here, Mrs. Endicott. Geez, don't you see him?"

"It would seem," said a dry voice, "that she doesn't, Otto." Wallace Endicott turned to the photographers, the private detectives. "My man will take care of you. If you'll go downstairs you'll be paid off. A bonus, Otto. They've been most helpful."

"But rape, Mister! You can't forget a little thing like rape!"

"Do you know who I am?" demanded James Niles. "I'll have your licenses!"

"Brother, you go to jail for a long time when you try to rape a sweet young dame."

Wallace ushered them from the room.

Elaine Endicott sighed.

"Look," said James Niles, "you can't do this to me, Elaine. You just can't."

"Can't I, Jimmy?"

He sat down on the bed, recovering his wits somewhat. "I'll outbuy you. Whatever you offer, I'll double."

Wallace Endicott returned to the room. The Southern Drawl tried to follow him inside, but the door was unceremoniously banged in her face. Wallace darted a quick glance at the shivering figure and pulled a blanket from the bed.

"Here, drape this around you, Elaine."

"I'll smash you, Endicott. As God is my witness, I'll smash you if you don't call her off."

"As I recall it, Niles, I owe you a certain sum of money."

The business mind leaped ahead of him. "No. Don't try it. I warn you, don't try it."

"With my money, Niles. I'm sure I can coax the witness into a court of law."

"Wallace, you don't want a divorce."

"You shut your damned mouth." He spun, looking ugly. "You cheap whore. You couldn't let well enough alone. You had to have all the marbles, didn't you?"

"You love me, Wallace."

"Behaving like a loony, trying to pin a filthy thing like that on me. Oh, I was on to your little game. Peace at any price, eh? A million to clear out, eh? When I've finished with you, you'll have nothing."

"I'll have what I want, Wallace. It'll be more than a year. It'll be a lifetime, I think."

James Niles began to breathe more easily. "There, isn't that what you want, Endicott?"

He shook his head. "Sarah and I will be married, Niles. I was a damn fool. All right, I was. Let's face it. She was Maria in her pagan way. She pleased me. I thought it would be fun. But it wasn't. It isn't. She takes dope, too. Not with heroin. Money. She likes the sniff of it, the feel of it, the sound of it. To hell with you or me or anyone else, so long as she has the money. Do you think I don't know? I got it all from her side-

kick. It was her manager. But to hell with him, too. Let the poor devil die as long as she made money."

"What can you do, Wallace?"

He grunted.

"I'll press charges against Niles. Niles will smash you. Leaving you where?"

James Niles found it difficult, once more, to breathe.

"There's only one thing that puzzles me, Jimmy. Will you answer just one simple question? Why? You wanted Sarah. Then why did you try to help him?"

"You answered that downstairs, didn't you?" James Niles got to his feet wearily. He hated women, suddenly.

She nodded. "It would give him a hold on me, isn't that it? Then I'd have to behave or I'd end up with nothing."

"No. Because he loves you, though don't ask me why. Because I had the thought that if it were pushed to the finish he'd come to understand that once and for all."

"Poor Wallace."

He stiffened.

"Wallace, all I ever wanted was money. You had it. Why didn't you take the rest for granted?"

"What about Joe?" asked Wallace Endicott.

She sighed.

"What about Mike and Phil and Tom and Pete and Paul?"

"I suppose it's perfectly respectable for a girl to eschew panties. After all, a dress will cover me."

"What about Ted?"

"Wallace, you make me sound perfectly horrible. They were all small people. Why shouldn't I have used them?"

"And then, it would be me, one day."

There was a melodious laughter.

"But now you'll have me forever, Wallace, won't you?"

Jimes Niles shivered. It was a voice to make your very bones grow cold.

Quite suddenly he pitied Wallace Endicott.

Or was the girl to be pitied, he wondered, meeting his eyes.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE WARM Gulf Stream winds pushed insistently through the window, making the cheap curtains flutter. Soon it would turn the room into an oven of a kind and then they'd have to get up and go down to the beach to dip their perspiring bodies in the Gulf of Mexico.

"Carter?"

He didn't answer. Big and warm on the bed, he lay there like a person dead. It made Kitty smile.

She smiled fondly. She sat up on the bed, looked down at Carter's big, white muscular body, and gave his bottom a hard pinch.

"Wake up, honey. The sun will be coming up soon. I want to look at it from the beach."

He shuddered. He mumbled protest. You'd think he'd missed his sleep for a hundred nights in a row. "What time is it?"

"Time to get up, Carter. Time to get up and look at the pretty sunrise."

He rolled onto his back. She waited for it, and when he reached for her she snuggled against him contentedly. "It's nice to wake up like this, Carter. Let's always wake up like this before the rest of the world's awake."

"You're very pretty, Kitty. I especially admire your spine. What a very straight spine it is."

"You may kiss my spine."

He did.

"I have to write Elaine a letter, I guess. Carter, you sure we should return the check? We could use the dough."

"I don't like blood money. I never have, I never will."

"Composers have to eat. I won't have you playing the piano in that honkytonk after the first of the month."

"We'll get by."

She started. "I didn't hear you. Carter, what did you say?"

He didn't speak. His fingers closed in her blonde hair and gave a sharp, backward pull. She yiped. She tried to twist to get her fist banging away on his belly, but the first thing she knew she was laying flat on the bed and he was sitting on top of her as though she was a horse.

"I can't breathe!"

"I said," he repeated, "that we'll get by." She couldn't see his face in the dark but she could see the flash of his black eyes, the flash of his big, strong teeth.

"No marriage, though. No marriage, Carter. When we're tired of it we'll shake one another's hand and move on."

"Did I tell you I got the license?"

"Carter, I'm choking. Carter, I can't breathe!"

He jumped to his feet and went over to the window. The dawn was breaking. Now gold streaked the eastern sky, and in the flat gray of the water, here and there, you could see the reflection of the gold. He inhaled deeply. He liked the perfumed air, the quiet beauty of the day. He liked the sound of Kitty weeping on the bed behind him. A whole symphony, he thought, could be built around a woman's sobs. He wished he had that power.

"In New York," he said quietly, firmly, "I was a damn fool." He swung around, standing with feet wide apart, his torso clean-lined against the morning sky. "I liked Ted. I liked Ted a lot. And his death was so senseless, so unnecessary. I guess it made me sick clean down to here." He pounded his midriff. "I had to get away. I had to think."

"Carter, she did love him. I'll tell you that now. I didn't think so at first. But the last time I saw her in New York—poor Elaine. Carter, she never gave herself a chance."

"She never gave Ted a chance, and I hope her soul rots in hell."

"I'll send the check back. Maybe it's just as well. Maybe it's time I stopped writing her? I don't know. She was all right in the beginning, Carter. Sure, the two of us did a lot of things, worked a lot of angles. But there wasn't anything mean in her then. We did different things to eat, to keep moving ahead. She —it happened in New York. It happened in Anastasia's Place in Greenwich Village. He came in. He was drunk and he was wearing a funny kind of cape and he smelled of money. And I think she looked at him and took him for a fool and . . . after that, she was different."

Would she be an evil shadow in his life forever? "Forget her," he cried hoarsely. "To hell with her. It's over. We're here, and we're all that matters."

"Sure, Carter, sure."

"We'll be married."

"Do you want that?"

"I want that."

2

"Then we'll be married."

"It was good while it lasted Millie."

"Geez it was all right."

"All them swells comin' in to raise a little hell. It sure was excitin'."

"Especially when Miss Warburton was singing here. Geez, she sure packed them in."

"Cripes."

"Geez."

He took her hand, an ordinary looking man in an ordinary Howard suit.

"I wonder if they'll ever open this place as a nightclub again, Millie?"

"Somebody said they was gonna make a fancy store out of it."

"You know what, Millie?"

"What, hubby?"

"You was real snappy stuff in that uniform."

"You sure looked nice in yours, too."

"I'll keep rememberin' this place. I don't care what kind of store it is, I'll always remember it the way it was the night the poor Underwood guy drank the champagne from her slipper. He was dyin' that night, Millie, an' never knew it."

She shivered. "Well, maybe she's the stinker they say she is, but me personally, I always thought she was all right. She used to give me tips, honey."

He scratched his cheek. A door banged shut, a key turned in the lock.

"You gonna open up somewhere else, Mr. Balke? Me and Millie would sure like to work for you again."

Arthur Balke smiled wearily. "We'll see, we'll see." He shrugged. "It's a tough racket, you know."

They nodded solemnly. Lumps in their throats they looked up at the darkened marquee. Already workmen were unscrewing the bulbs. The Club Piquant was just another memory in a street filled with memories . . .

"It makes you," said Millie, "want to cry."

Hand in hand they walked to Times Square . . .

3

"Yes, Mrs. Endicott."

"And I'll want the sitting room painted green, Jenson."

"Yes, Mrs. Endicott."

"And Hannah will have the adjoining bedroom."

"Yes, Mrs. Endicott."

Elaine nodded. She ticked off the last item jotted down on the scratch pad. She supposed the house would be one awful mess for the next few months and she didn't envy Jenson the job of seeing to all the alterations. She smiled wanly.

Thought Elaine: *To the victor belong the spoils.*

She stood up. One day Jenson would disappear as the others had, as so many important to her had. But in the meantime a humored Jenson would be of use. That was the important thing. When you'd finished using them it didn't matter if they stayed or left. It was the use that mattered, not the person itself.

"The past is the past, Jenson." She hesitated, then found a smile for the woman. She thrust out her hand. "I never harbor grudges, incidentally. Naturally your first loyalty had to be to Mr. Endicott. I wouldn't want your loyalty if it was something that could be won so easily. But I'll tell you this. I'll work hard to win a similar loyalty."

"Madame is most gracious."

"Thank you, Jenson," she said gravely.

She went back into her bedroom where Hannah was still energetically stuffing clothes into suitcases. Hannah's cheeks were red and wet.

"Tears aren't at all becoming, Hannah. Come, let's caper on the green or some gay thing such as that. After all, I won't be away forever."

"You're crazy," whimpered fat Hannah. "You're just plain crazy. I've got a hunch, I tell you. I've got a hunch I won't never see you again."

"Six months go by before you know it. Come. I'll buy a gift for you in every country we visit."

"I want to go along. Damn it, if he's taking Otto then you have the right to take me."

Elaine felt tempted. Hannah was always something strong to cling to. Hannah was one person she could count upon to the bitter end. All gone but Hannah . . . Kitty . . . Ted . . . Arthur . . . all the West Coast people . . .

"It has to be this way, dear. It's a beginning, don't you see? Beginnings must always be beautiful. Then when beginnings become ends there are some pleasant memories."

"Suppose he did kill his first wife? Suppose it was all just as Ted Underwood said it was?"

"Suppose, suppose, suppose! Hannah, I'm going over to the

Leroys to say good-bye. I expect everything to be packed when I get back. We're leaving at midnight, just think of it!"

She caught her mink from the closet and went downstairs. Hearing music in the library she paused. She decided the Leroys could wait.

"Wallace?"

"Yes, dear?"

He rose gallantly from the chair. Across the table he'd spread a huge map of the world, and with the help of Otto he'd engaged in marking out the route they'd take with red-topped pins. His brown eyes twinkled. "We've got as far as the Panama Canal. We'll be getting through the locks in another minute or so."

"Beat it, Otto, will you?"

The wisp of a man looked pained. "Gosh, Mrs. Endicott, I wasn't doin' nothin'."

"Otto, perhaps Jenson wants some help in the kitchen? You have to make your peace with her, don't you? Otto, you ought to be ashamed. Imagine pinching Jenson's backside at your age!"

Wallace Endicott gasped. "He—he did?"

"She didn't even squeal," complained Otto. "There's a dame that ain't human."

He went out, closing the door.

Rumbling laughter, Wallace Endicott sank back to his chair. "Something important?"

"Something important."

"You love me very much, no doubt."

"I like you, Wallace. By the way, isn't it amusing? James Niles discovered he didn't like Sarah after all. The Southern Drawl has gone back to Virginia to stay."

"Funny fellow, Miles. But he kept his wits about him. If he'd cracked I'd have had a railroad free and clear. You should have let me crack him."

"It didn't seem practical, Wallace. I'm sorry. I didn't want to use that sort of pressure. But you made me."

"The other pressure was worse. I thought you were losing your mind. Then Otto overheard you talking to Hannah and . . . by the way, I think we'll fire her."

"Would you like to bet, Wallace? One hundred will get you five."

"You wouldn't want to give me a divorce, would you."

"For five million."

"A hundred thousand in cash, and no hard feelings."

"No."

He shrugged. He picked a pin from the box and jabbed it into the map viciously. "It ought to be a nice trip. Think of the sights we'll see."

She pulled the table away from him. While he growled a protest she sat down on his lap and kissed his fleshy cheek. "Money makes me happy, Napoleon."

"As happy as you'd be with Ted?"

Her green eyes grew enormous with a sudden violent hate.

"Sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have asked that."

"I'll tell you what Ted was, Wallace. Ted was a dream."

He ground his teeth.

"But just in a girl's dream, Wallace. The day came and where was the dream. Where are the dreams in the broad sunshine?"

"I had one, too. Now it's gone."

"Maria?"

"You."

"Wallace."

"It's too late, Elaine. It died when you were putting on the act. You'd use anything, wouldn't you, to make a dollar more?"

He sighed, looking at the map. "You know what, Elaine?"

"What."

He met her eyes. "I wonder which of us will be murdered first."

"Wallace!"

He got up and went to the map. He jabbed another pin into it:

Now the boat was on the Pacific Ocean, now the night was dark.

"Listen to me, Wallace, listen to me."

There wouldn't be a moon to frighten Otto.

"I've got what I want now, Wallace. I'll make you a good wife. You'll see. Darling, you're it, you're it, you're it."

The water was like quicksand, in its way.

He caressed her cheek. How soft and warm it was. How beautiful she was.

"I'm so glad to hear it," he said.

Now the boat was docking in Hawaii. Just Otto and himself, just Otto and himself . . . and another memory.

"Now tell the Leroys good-bye, my dear. How pretty you are in green. You must wear green more often."

"I'll wear green always," she promised.

THE END

EVIL

She climbed a social ladder that started at the very bottom—thief . . . dope addict . . . chorus girl. But ruthless, sultry Elaine Warburton made it—now she was the socially prominent wife of a respected millionaire.

But he was a fat, 60 year old Prince Charming.

Elaine was sure she could buy the love she desperately needed. But could she? Which force would really triumph? The heart, the dollar, or strange lust. . . .

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